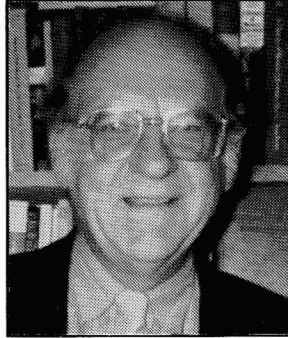


Editorial

David Wright



Of one thing we may be sure: challenging issues about sexual relationships other than (heterosexual) marriage will not go away, whatever the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland or any church organ decides in 1995. The reason for this is simple—that the acceptance of such relationships is widespread in our society, and in particular has deep roots in influential areas of British culture, both popular and more sophisticated.

Another reason is more worrying: some of the opinion-formers within the mainstream churches seem to view these developments almost as bearers of fresh wisdom from God. The social realities of sexual behaviour are no longer, it seems, to be evaluated in the light of God's once-for-all self-revelation in Christ; they may even be held to constitute norms which the churches ignore at their peril. As the present Archbishop of York once put it, unless the Church of England changes its mind on divorce, it will lose touch with the people—as though the latter is more to be feared than departing from what that Church believes to be the mind of God. Such an attitude informs many a revisionist approach to these questions, even if it is not expressed in such naked terms.

We may expect, therefore, that Christians who see no reason to abandon traditional teaching grounded in Scripture will increasingly find themselves swimming against the tide. The Christian lifestyle will become more and more counter-cultural, and be-

cause of the growing acceptance, in sectors of mixed denominations, of sub-Christian patterns of behaviour (as they have hitherto been universally regarded), internal church divisions are likely to widen. The cohesiveness of a body like the Church of Scotland will surely be tested as never before—if (which God forbid) it tolerates elders living together outside marriage or practising homosexuals pairing off in the manse.

Pastors and teachers who are sensitive to the signs of the times will already be equipping their congregations, especially at the younger end, to live against the stream. I sometimes wonder if ministers are direct or explicit enough in their teaching on sexual morality. A proper modesty may have its place, but sometimes too much is taken for granted. Why is it that from time to time students turn up in university CUs never having heard that sex outside marriage is wrong? It is an odd situation if every other means of communication that influences our lives calls a spade a spade apart from the pulpit.

Moreover, we have to be ready with more than straight affirmation. The arguments of the revisionists must be shown to be wanting. What follows will attempt to provide some guidance for this task.

Relationships: values versus form?

It is often said that what matters is not the structure of a relationship, but the qualities that inform it. What gives it

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integrity are virtues like trust, openness, commitment and acceptance, irrespective of whether it conforms to God's design. Much better, so it is claimed, a partnership that displays these values, whether heterosexual or homosexual, than a loveless shrivelled marriage. As countless pop songs put it, love is all you need—scarcely different from the 'new morality' of a generation ago (John Robinson, Harry Williams *et al.*) which opposed love to law and first taught Christians that sex outside marriage might, with love, be OK. (What a fearful responsibility that 'new morality' generation bears for our present disorders!)

If we take our bearings from Scripture, this is a false choice. Divinely ordered relationships and God-given qualities belong together. The fact that some marriages go sour is no warrant for dispensing with marriage. There is no basis in Scripture for believing that love and other Christian qualities justify or hallow an improper relationship. It is undeniable that cohabiting couples may show deep and selfless affection for each other, and that a 'gay' partnership may be marked by enviable mutual care. (We have no interest in rubbishing all such relationships as fired by selfish gratification.) But they fall short in varying degrees of God's plan for one-to-one relationships in which alone is sexual fulfilment to be found. Honour among thieves may be truly admirable, but it does not sanction thieving.

Starting at the beginning: the heterosexual norm

There are few things as fundamental in the biblical revelation as the divine ordering of heterosexual monogamy. It is found throughout Scripture—for example, in two of the Ten Commandments, in the teaching of Jesus, where it is reaffirmed and its implications deepened, and in Ephesians as an image of the love between Christ and his church. To excise or override this foundation is to do deep structural damage to the teaching of Scripture. And if it is objected that Jesus, the perfect human being, was not married,

that very fact marked him out as destined for a highly exceptional calling among his contemporaries.

We must refuse to let go of this starting point. Too many discussion documents from churches in recent years have begun elsewhere—with a general or common sexuality celebrated as God's gift. Only later do they go on to consider the proper expressions of this sexuality. But the Bible knows nothing of an undifferentiated or abstract sexuality, which may be exercised in different ways. From start to finish it presents heterosexuality—men created as sexual beings for sexual matching with women, and women likewise for men. To abandon this basis (which is embodied in the differing anatomies of male and female) is to set off on the wrong foot at the outset.

So the biblical case for disapproving of homosexual conduct does not rest on a few contested texts, but on a widely pervasive feature of the revealed wisdom of God for human life. Yet the explicit New Testament references (Rom. 1:26–27, 1 Cor. 6:9) carry a heavier punch than revisionists allow. (See my Cutting Edge series booklet *The Christian Faith and Homosexuality*, and more fully my article in *Evangelical Quarterly* 61, 1989, pp. 291–300, 'Homosexuality: the Relevance of the Bible'.)

Not forgetting the fall

Against this backcloth of God's creative blueprint, the many distortions of sexual disposition and behaviour in human society have to be understood in terms of the fallenness of all humankind. In the case of homosexuality, this applies to orientation as well as to behaviour, and this will not change if or when a genetic explanation for the homosexual condition is discovered.

There is no mileage in denying or resisting the identification of genetic factors as wholly or partly responsible for homosexual tendencies. To do otherwise would be to take refuge in something like God-of-the-gaps theology in reverse, as though only in the gaps in current genetic science could one discern the effects of the fall.

It is no new challenge for biblical Christians to regard deeply ingrained inclinations or orientations in men and women, whether genetically caused or not, as part of the detritus of the fallenness of the race. In this respect, as in others, homosexuality must not be isolated either from the reach of basic Christian beliefs or from other comparable conditions, such as alcoholism, kleptomania or paedophilia.

Loving the sinner, hating the sin

This sounds glib and facile, and is often resented by 'gay' lobbyists as insulting. Yet it is surely, as a general phrase, no more—and no less!—than what the core message of Christianity is all about! If the mission of Jesus, and the reason why the incarnate Son was given this human name, was to save us from our sins, then not only the distinction between sinner and their sins but also the separation of one from the other lie at the heart of things. Again, this approach to homosexuality sets it in the context of the gospel which encompasses 'all sorts and conditions of men'. I emphasize this point in the face of denials, implicit or explicit, that homosexuals need, or can benefit from, the central message of the Christian gospel, which summons us all—or rather, only sinners, not the righteous!—to faith and repentance.

Human identity—in creation and in Christ

One reason why revisionists resent 'love the sinner, hate the sin' is that they treat homosexuality as constitutive of a person's identity. Talk of sundering a man or woman from his or her homosexuality is thus felt as a threat to their essential being. What they demand is acceptance specifically as 'gay' or lesbian.

This sense of hurt calls for a sensitive response. It may well be the case that when we talk about homosexuality in any public gathering, one or more of those listening will feel that their whole being is under challenge. We need to be aware of this possibility, without accepting the assumptions and instincts it represents. It may be under-

standable, in a society so preoccupied with (heterosexual) sexual fulfilment as ours appears to be, why persons of different sexual disposition should perceive their identity so much in terms of this difference.

But it is surely far healthier to insist that our worth as human beings consists in our being created in God's image and recreated in Christ. No higher value can be placed on a man or woman than this. It is a particularly worrying feature of the 'gay' and lesbian Christian movement that it seeks recognition of homosexuals precisely in terms of their homosexuality, instead of as creatures of God, sinful like all of us but capable of being remade in Christ. Others do not rest their personal identity in their heterosexuality!

Acceptance and non-acceptance

The domination of late twentieth century liberal Christianity by an almost antinomian inclusivism is reflected in the way 'acceptance' has ousted 'forgiveness'. Forgiveness recognizes, and acceptance often implicitly denies, the need for repentance. Christ accepts us as sinners, but accepts us in forgiveness, not in mere recognition that we are who we are. And where there is room for forgiveness (and there is no acceptance by God without it), there is room for hearts and lives to be changed. Jesus refused to condemn the adulteress to the punishment Jewish law required, but his acceptance of her accompanied a sharp summons to abandon her adultery. Much the same can be said of the use of 'affirm' (except that grammatically it is much odder to say 'the gospel affirms me!').

Evangelical churches above all others should be places where the good news of a forgiving and welcoming God is heard in unmistakable tones by sinners of all kinds—including the notorious offenders of the Gospels. But there is no hint in the Gospels that Jesus approved or tolerated prostitutes continuing to ply their trade or tax-gatherers continuing to fleece tax-payers. The Scottish Reformed

tradition has probably erred in the direction of legalism, but this is no excuse for swinging to the other extreme of cheap grace that makes no moral demands and expects no moral renewal.

Reading the Bible whole: or, against separating what God has joined together

The revisionist liberalism that is now ready to accept non-marital heterosexual and same-sex relationships often seems a throwback to the Jesus-only liberalism of an earlier era. The Old Testament and Paul are largely pensioned off as incurably patriarchal, in an exclusive appeal to the Jesus of the Gospels. Yet even this is not free from selectivity—citing John 8:11a but omitting John 8:11b. A church in the Reformed tradition should be the last to excise the Old Testament from the Bible like Marcion, if it is faithful to its true genius. (It is alarming that some of the strongest pressure for change is coming from individuals who openly disown allegiance to the Reformed tradition of Christianity in particular.)

It is difficult to take seriously as an argument in favour of accepting homosexual behaviour that Jesus said nothing about it. If this is indeed the case, it would not be surprising. Jesus said nothing about a great many topics that were not live issues in Palestine in his day—like social security schemes, democracy and votes for all, and equal pay for women (and even about many that presumably were, like nationalism, housing the homeless, disarmament and the care of the terminally ill) And it is agreed that homosexuality became an issue for the Jews only when they spread into the Hellenistic world (just as earlier it had been an issue for Israel only when encountered among its Canaanite neighbours).

This argument from the silence of Jesus is a kind of negative proof text—and reflects a naively unhistorical treatment of the Gospels. As such, it is another instance of the arbitrary selectivity that the revisionist case relies on throughout: it severely restricts the

relevance of the Old Testament and most of the New Testament apart from the Gospels on the grounds of their historical relativism (they reflect the social and cultural worlds in which they originated), but asks questions of the Gospels in a totally non-historical fashion. If any of the Bible is historically conditioned, all of it is. There is no core-gospel (not even 'God is love') which comes to us except in a particular vocabulary (first-century Greek in this case), from a particular context (that of 1 John, its author and recipients). 'God is love' is true in a biblical sense, *i.e.* as biblically warranted, only when 'God' and 'love' are given their first-century contextualised meanings—not as any modern might care to conceive of God and love!

Note well: the sound response to 'But that's all patriarchalism!' is not to try to carve out some reserved territory free of this plague, but to insist that there is no self-revelation of God except that given under such socio-cultural limitations. Jesus was not incarnate except as a Jew in first-century Palestine, nor crucified except 'under Pontius Pilate', and the New Testament comes to us only in Hellenistic Greek. We either accept—and glory in!—the scandal of particularity, or set about creating our own religion in embarrassment at the once-for-all givenness of historic Christianity.

So the debate about homosexuality turns out to encapsulate a number of the critical issues in the battle to hold on to a Christianity that is recognisably the faith of our fathers. The alternative is a faith that is made in our own image, and made anew in every generation. But of a faith in which we see the reflection, narcissistically, of our contemporary society's values and aspirations, one thing is sure—it cannot save contemporary society. A gospel read off even the best of today's insights and wisdom will be so different (a gospel) that it will not be (another) gospel at all.

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Preaching

Preaching the Word: Cerebral or Emotional?

David Searle

The charge is often brought against evangelists that their preaching is too emotional. Some of them are distinctly thin on content and major instead on plucking at the heart strings. They tell sentimental stories aiming for conversions *via* the emotions of their audience. We have all heard that kind of preaching. It can be very well done, people are moved—sometimes to tears—but at the end of the day, when one actually analyses the message, it has been almost without Biblical content.

On the other hand, reformed theologians are often accused of being too cerebral. In his article on New Age in the first issue of *The Rutherford Journal*, John Drane states that reformed theologians 'have most easily worn the rationalist label'.

An assault on reason

One young man who has been caught up into the Toronto Blessing wrote to tell me about his experience and informed me that the Holy Spirit was

mounting 'an assault on our reason'. He had been thrown to the ground by the Holy Spirit, he claimed, because he had been too cerebral in his approach to faith. He had lost touch with spiritual power and that was why, against all reasonable explanation, he had experienced the phenomenon of uncontrollable laughter and others the accompanying animal noises.

Well, is it true that reformed preachers generally are too intellectual? Is our approach to faith, and to that preaching which is God's appointed instrument through which the Holy Spirit brings people to faith, too cerebral? Do we emphasise the place of the mind too much? Ought we to work far more on our hearers' emotions? Ought we to seek to reach their wills via their emotions and be content to by-pass their brains?

Mental stagnation

This question is not simply an academic one. It is actually a pressing contemporary issue. The problem is at

least twofold. First, in general people use their brains less and less today. Technology provides instant knowledge. We are no longer encouraged to think for ourselves. The television advertisements, to say nothing of the content of many programmes, assume that people don't want to think. While road-menders, carpenters and crofters of Scotland could hold their own a hundred years ago in profound philosophical debate, often at second year university level, Joe Public today doesn't even know what philosophy is.

Many in our congregations have a reading age of about eight years. I recall the numbed sense of disbelief with which I discovered, as a young minister, that certain of my elders who were professional men—bank managers, headteachers and businessmen—couldn't actually think! As I came to know them in their homes, I found their staple reading matter was *The Sunday Post*. Take them away from their professional expertise, and invite them to explore a new area of thinking, and my awful discovery was that their brains had atrophied.

Sub-Christian

But there is a second reason why this matter of the rational element in our preaching is a contemporary issue demanding our attention. While most, if not all, Scottish homes used to have a Bible, most nowadays don't even have a book. The shelves are lined with video tapes of films which, rather than expanding the mind, debase and defile it. That being so, most of those in Scottish Churches today listen to our preaching from a starting point of almost complete ignorance. Some of our elders have views, strongly held, which are not merely sub-Christian, but are even anti-Christian. We can no longer assume a basic understanding of Scripture and the Christian faith. Many young ministers begin in congregations where the faith sincerely held is no longer a 'Christian' faith.

Little wonder, then, that so many preachers abandon the great endeavour to bring people to faith by addressing their minds. They have taken a route

out through the back door, and have said, 'We can't beat them, so we'll just have to join them'. Many sermons have become banal in the extreme—a few stories, with the sort of explanation which pretends the text contains no theology at all.

My question is, therefore, 'Where ought we to be in this final decade of the century in this whole area of mind

The effect of these physical phenomena—healings, demonic activity and the casting out of demons—all created a huge stir with people flocking from miles around.

What was the Lord's response to this excitement? Even a cursory reading of the Gospels tells us that he did everything in His power to avoid it. He saw it as a major obstacle to His real minis-

mighty God in which mere mortals find they must put their hands over their mouths.

The presence of the Holy Spirit is awesome. In my limited experience, when the Spirit comes in power, one yearns to bow low, to hide one's face, and the tears cannot be kept back. The only possible initial response is to surrender oneself to God with a totality that reaches into every compartment, every nook and cranny, of one's innermost soul. I cannot think of a word to describe one's emotions in the presence of God less appropriate than excitement. Adoration, yes. Excitement, no.

When the Devil asked the Lord to bow down and worship him, he was not asking Jesus for a song!

and emotions? Have we been too cerebral? Have we neglected the emotional appeal? Do we need a change of direction?' I have certain propositions. They are all concerned, either directly or indirectly, with preaching. And I bring them before you in the conviction that preaching, empowered by the Holy Spirit who works in response to believing prayer, is the single most important activity any minister of Christ is ever called upon to do.

Emotional excitement is to be avoided as far as possible

I don't want to comment on the Toronto Blessing movement which recently has come to Scotland, apart from making this one observation: it is not difficult to fill a church, or even a stadium, if emotional excitement is laid on. That is not to say that everyone who has espoused the Toronto movement is motivated by emotionalism. But it is to assert that wherever one finds physical phenomena being manifested, the crowds will flock.

Physical phenomena

We only have to turn to the Gospels to see this. People in the Lord's day were no different to people today. Certain miraculous phenomena accompanied the Lord's own ministry, as we know.

try of preaching. No crowd bent on witnessing supernatural activity wants to listen seriously; they want to speculate. So when those whom the Lord healed, and whom he sternly commanded to say nothing to anyone about their healing, disobeyed and broadcast their good news, he could no longer openly enter the towns, but had to hide away in the remoter areas (Mark 1:45).

Earlier in Mark 1, Simon Peter went to look for the Lord because He had disappeared, and the crowds wanted Him after the evening of healing in Capernaum: Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: 'Everyone is looking for you!' Jesus replied, 'Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come' (Mark 1:36ff.).

Silence

My first proposition, then, is that emotional excitement is to be avoided as far as humanly possible. I believe with all my heart that there is a huge difference between emotional excitement and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Iain Murray, surely one of the world's leading authorities on Revival, has told us that the effect of the Spirit's presence has always been, in the first instance, silence; a silence that can be felt; a silence in the presence of Al-

Yet, in so many churches today, and especially in youth rallies, the aim seems too often to be to excite. There is no worse preparation for the preaching of the Word of God than excitement through pure emotionalism. I recall speaking in Northern Ireland at a Youth Rally which was held in my former church. There must have been about 900 to 1000 young people gathered. (That is not uncommon in the Province). A musical group had been brought in to lead what they called 'The Worship'. That large gathering had had over an hour of singing.

When I stood to speak, few wanted to listen. They had been intoxicated by drums and beat and a kind of singing which had excited them emotionally. I found that before I could get through to them, I had to overcome the spirit that was abroad in the gathering. That is not the only occasion when I have had that experience.

True worship

We need discernment, therefore, to know the difference between the presence of God and emotional excitement. Sometimes, I know, the two can overlap as the Spirit works *in spite of* the excitement. But mostly, the Spirit absents Himself from the spirit of excitement for reasons which I hope we shall see. Worship is not making a jolly, loud noise or singing our heads

off. Worship is nothing to do with that. *Worship is the surrender of our wills to God to serve Him as His slaves all our days.*

The third temptation of our Lord should teach us that. When the devil asked the Lord to bow down and worship him, he was not asking Jesus for a song! He was asking for our Lord's surrender to him; he was asking for capitulation, allegiance, for the pledge of his will in life-long service. That is worship. Singing can be almost incidental to worship. You can have hours of singing without any worship.

Worship, you must know, lies at the heart of the Ten Commandments. The first and second commandments are built around true worship of God and prohibition of false worship. 'Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all'. That, in the final analysis, is worship.

I haven't strayed from my point. Modern happy-clappy singing can very subtly cross the line into emotional excitement. When it does, you might as well close your Bible and put your sermon in your pocket, because when the congregation has been stirred up like that no one will really want to hear the preaching of the Word of God.

Preaching is addressed to people's minds

One only has to take a Bible in one's hands and turn the pages over from Genesis to Revelation to see that God is addressing himself to men and women first and foremost through their minds. Let us focus on this more particularly. Look at some of the preaching in the Acts of the Apostles to see this demonstrated for us. Take Peter's great sermon on the Day of Pentecost. What is the methodology inherent in his preaching?

Preaching in Acts to Jews

First, he speaks to them about what they already *know and believe*. He takes the passage from Joel 2, and then quotations from Psalms 16 and 110.

Second, he speaks of events of

which they are fully aware, namely, the recent crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. He ties in those recent events, along with the phenomenon of Pentecost itself, to the Old Testament scriptures. He shows how these events—the ministry, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus along with the outpouring of the Spirit—fulfil scriptures which his hearers already know and believe.

Third, he calls them to repentance and faith in Christ.

Now we know that in Acts 2 we only have the merest skeleton outline of Peter's preaching. We know that because Luke tells us so: (Acts 2:40) 'With many other words he warned them and he pleaded with them...' But before Peter came to what your homiletics teacher might call his 'application', he explained and expounded the Scriptures the people knew in the light of facts of which they were fully aware.

That tends to be the Acts pattern of preaching in Jerusalem and in the synagogues. We might call it, 'The fulfilment pattern', because it is based on the Old Testament Scriptures. Its methodology is to demonstrate that the events of the Lord's life, together with the growth of His Church, can be explained and understood in the light of Old Testament promises.

You must see that it is primarily an appeal to the mind. Luke summarises for us the apostolic synagogue preaching: (Acts 17:2-4) 'As his custom was, Paul went into the synagogue, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. "This Jesus I am proclaiming to you is the Christ", he said. Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women.'

Preaching in Acts to Gentiles

What about preaching to Gentile audiences who were not familiar with Scripture? We have to go for an example of how Paul tackled that kind of

situation to his Areopagitica in Athens. There have been many studies done of this sermon, and we haven't time to look at them today¹. Suffice it to say that I believe it has been satisfactorily demonstrated that Paul's approach remains essentially an appeal to the minds of the Athenians and that Luke records for us a model of preaching which is addressed to an audience who had no prior knowledge of the Lord God, an approach which brilliantly crosses the cultural gap and builds the necessary bridge over which Paul will later cross to bring the full Christian gospel.

Dramatic conversions

Move on with me to consider for a moment the anguish through which Saul of Tarsus had to pass during the three days of his blindness after he had encountered the risen Lord on the Damascus road. We tend to emphasise that encounter and to talk and think as if that was Paul's conversion. But try and get into his mind and follow his thinking as he prayed for those three days.

His assumptions had been, first, that Jesus was a criminal who had been cursed [excommunicated] by his crucifixion; second, that Christians were a bunch of deluded heretics who needed annihilating, and he was genuinely serving God in vigorously seeking to do just that; third, that he himself was attaining righteousness through strict observance of the law.

Try and understand the massive shift in the thinking of Saul of Tarsus. His anguish as he discovered that the cursed Nazarene who had been cut off from the people of God—even from God himself—by hanging on a tree, this Jesus was actually Lord! His mind was grappling with the Scriptures he knew so well. The Holy Spirit was leading him into a new understanding of Isaiah 53, Psalm 22, Jeremiah 31, as well as of the whole Levitical system.

These Christians—what of them? Followers of the Way? They must be right! In persecuting them, he had been persecuting their Lord. And what of the Law, in which he was so deeply

schooling and to which he was both intellectually and emotionally bound? All along, it had been a school-master to lead him to the Christ and he had never realised it. Righteousness was not by the law at all; it was through faith in the risen Saviour. Paul had to square all he knew of the Old Testament (and who would deny that his knowledge and grasp of the Old Testament was immense!) with the fact of the risen Jesus who had revealed himself to him as Lord.

I don't for one moment want to detract in any way from the mystery of regeneration. Nevertheless it would be foolish, even dishonest, to deny that Paul's mind grappled with theology in the most remarkable way. His mind was enlightened by the Holy Spirit, so that his past strict religious life became like refuse, dross, dung! What a conversion! My conclusion is that preaching is addressed to our people's minds.

More than 30 NT words for preaching

I recently came across a short paragraph in the article on *kehrussw*, 'I preach', in Kittel.² The point is made that in the New Testament there are about 30 synonyms used for *kehrussw*. I took time to look up each word and discovered that the writer had actually omitted several. Here are a few of the NT words used of preaching:

λεγω—speak, mean, tell; see Matt. 5:33ff.

λαλεω—talk, say; see 1 Cor. 2:6f.

αποφθεγγομαι—speak out, utter forth; see Acts 2:14; 26:25.

ομιλεω—commune, converse with; see Acts 20:11.

διηγομαι—relate, narrate; see Luke 8:39; Heb. 11:32.

εξηγομαι—interpret, expound; see John 1:18; Acts 15:12ff.

διαλεγομαι—address, preach, reason; see Acts 17:2, 17; 18:4, 19.

διερμηνευω—interpret, explain; see Luke 24:27; 1 Cor. 14:5, 13, 27.

γνωριζω—make known; see Luke 2:15, 17; John 15:15; 17:26.

αγγελω—report, announce; see John

20:18.

αναγγελω—announce, explain; see John 4:25; 16:13, 14, 15; Acts 20:20.

απαγγελω—announce from one place to another; see Matt. 11:4; 12:18.

διαγγελω—announce throughout the world; see Luke 9:60; Rom. 9:17.

εξαγγελω—announce publicly, declare; see 1 Pet. 2:9.

καταγγελω—announce, proclaim; see Acts 4:2; 13:5, 28.

ευαγγελιζομαι—bring good news; see Matt. 11:5; Luke 3:18; 4:18; Acts 5:42

παρρησιζομαι—speak boldly; see Acts 9:27f; 14:3; Ephesians 6:20.

μαρτυρεω—bear witness, testify; see John 1:7, 8, 15; Acts 10:43.

επιμαρτυρεω—call to witness; see 1 Peter 5:12.

διαμαρτυρομαι—give solemn evidence, warn; see Luke 16:28; Acts 2:40.

πειθω—urge, seek to persuade; see Acts 13:43; 17:4; 18:4; 19:8.

ομολογεω—publicly declare, confess; see John 1:20; Heb. 13:15.

κραζω—cry aloud; see John 1:15; 7:28, 37; 12:44; Acts 23:6.

προφητευω—declare the will of God, prophesy; see Luke 1:67; Acts 2:17; 19:6.

διδασκω—teach; see Matt. 5:2; 7:29; 9:35; Acts 4:2, 18.

παραδιδομι—hand over, hand down; see 1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15:3; 2 Pet. 2:21.

νουθετεω—admonish, warn, instruct; see Acts 20:31; 1 Cor. 4:14; Col. 1:28.

(τον λογον) ορθοτομεω—define; see 2 Tim. 2:15.

παρακαλεω—strengthen, exhort, plead; see Luke 3:18; Acts 2:20; 14:22; 15:32.

ελεγχω—reprove, rebuke, expose error, correct; see John 6:18; 2 Tim. 4:2.

επιτιμαω—rebuke, chide, censure; see 2 Tim. 4:2.

Full-orbed NT preaching

We need a full-orbed picture of NT preaching. What are we doing when we stand and preach? Think of some of your sermons of the past months. What did you do? Did you expound doctrine? If you did, what percentage of your sermon was doctrinal exp-

osition? That's all very well, but consider some of these NT words: speak out, converse with, narrate [the preacher narrates a story, there should often be narrative in our sermons], interpret/explain, reason, make known /unfold, announce, declare, bring good news, speak boldly, call to witness, give solemn evidence, urge/persuade, confess, cry aloud, teach, pass on, warn, admonish, define, strengthen, comfort, exhort, reprove, rebuke, chide, instruct.

I find the versatility and broadness of the NT's portrayal of preaching very challenging. I suspect that much of my preaching for the past thirty-four years has been far too narrow in its scope.

Holy Spirit understanding

We must be careful not to think that preaching addressed to the mind has anything to do with a congregation's IQ. The understanding comes from the Holy Spirit. We all know brilliant minds which cannot grasp the simplicity of the statement, 'God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son'. Yet we know simple, uneducated folk with very little intellectual apparatus who understand Romans 8 with a clarity and delight which is astonishing.

In that regard, contrast the meaning of two words in our list, 'teach' and 'instruct'. Is the distinction between 'teaching' and 'instruction' the distinction between the theoretical and the practical? The clinical instructor in the hospital works on the wards helping the student nurses to put into practice the theory they have learned from the tutors in the classroom; the instructor on the mechanical engineering course takes the students to the workshop and helps them strip down an engine and put it together again. 'Instruction' suggests to me a process which is very practical. Without the 'teaching' element, it is almost certainly a waste of time. But combined with good teaching, instruction will form mature solid Christian men and women. Nevertheless, it is still directed to the understanding—the better understanding—of what has

been taught.

Some questions about our preaching

So, do we *warn, persuade, reason, expose error, chide, exhort, strengthen, declare*? Do we *bring good news*? Oh for good news in our pulpits! We have some depressive characters in Scottish pulpits who have no good news to tell. Their sermons are 99% bad news. Yes, preach the sinfulness of sin. Yes, preach death to self. But never preach any of that without the joy and glory and life and love and assurance of our blessed Redeemer.

Do we *define*, rightly dividing the word of truth? Do we *converse*—create a mental dialogue with our people?

many of us send shells which explode harmlessly in some place in the Church where no one is sitting. We need...direct hits

Preaching, you see, dies when it becomes a monologue. If our preaching is a monologue, without feedback, without an ongoing exchange of heart and soul between the preacher and his hearers, then it has become sterile and the potential fruit of righteousness will never form or mature but will wither on the stalks.

Do we *explain, interpret, make known, declare* the truth of God? Do we *address* people? Yes, *address* real people? So much preaching is to the middle distance. We fire our salvos, but into the air. I know that King Harold was killed at the Battle of Hastings by an arrow shot into the air. But many of us send shells which explode harmlessly in some place in the church where no one is sitting. We need, Sunday by Sunday, direct hits. Not near misses. So address people!

Away back in 1959, while I was studying divinity, the tape of James Philip's 1958 Keswick address on Romans 12:1 came into my hands. That address had a profound effect on my own life and subsequent ministry.

Let me quote: 'Paul in Romans has been expounding great and mighty doctrines of grace. Now in chapter 12 we have this word, *Therefore*. The order in Scripture is always the same, First exposition, then exhortation. First come the divine indicatives—what God has done for us. Then come the divine imperatives—what God demands of us'.

My preaching for thirty-four years has been based on that paragraph. 'First exposition, then exhortation.' Because in my Bible, the argument is from mind to will! The exhortation is always down-to-earth, massively relevant, anchored in the real world of work, home, living, growing old, dying. The Bible is earthed in the real world of

Beauty: Psalm 27:4; 29:2; **Desire:** Psalm 40:8; 42:1; 63:1.

What do we find? We find that invariably godly emotion—and our Bibles are packed with godly emotion—arises from an understanding of the will, purposes, goodness, love and holiness of God. With a greater knowledge of God comes deeper emotional experience. The shallower the understanding, the thinner the emotion; the greater the understanding, the deeper the emotion.

Guilt is at its most intense when the knowledge of God's laws and character are most clearly understood. *Fear and holy awe of God* are greatly heightened as knowledge of God is increased. *Confidence and assurance* grow strong when understanding of covenant mercy is clearer. *Joy* reaches its zenith when the grace of a good and loving God is grasped. It is not only the Psalms which tell this story. Our whole Bibles tell the same story. So what, then, are the lessons for preaching today?

Address people's minds

We live an apostate age, in which much of our society has become quite pagan. Those who minister in pulpits without an evangelical tradition cannot assume their congregations know the Scriptures. They must begin, therefore, teaching the Word of God with a view to bringing understanding of the character, ways, laws, holiness and love of God. They need to use the full scope of Biblical presentation we have just seen.

If our own knowledge of preaching, as it is portrayed for us in Scripture, increases, then our style of preaching will be expanded and will perhaps begin to include elements and aspects which we never utilised before. What we will be doing will be addressing ourselves in many different ways to the minds of our hearers.

Perhaps a reference to music will illustrate. Think of the many moods in a fine piece of music. Those listening can be carried to great heights, and then be taken down to solemn depths, and then swept away into some ro-

service, temptation, the world's allurements, Satan's stratagems and accusations, grace to live by. Is our preaching in this real world?

Truly godly emotions spring from an ever greater understanding of the truth of God.

About two weeks ago, I embarked on a reading of the Psalms looking for evidence of emotions. What did I find? As W.P. Nicolson used to say, 'Boys-a-days!' Boys-a-days! Did I find emotion! Let me share with you a little of my discoveries. Here is just a small selection of emotion which leapt out at me from the Psalms as I skimmed through them: **Guilt:** Psalm 32:3–5; 38:4; **Fear:** Psalm 111:10; 119:120; 119:161; **Confidence:** Psalm 91:1–2; **Jealousy for God's glory:** Psalm 119:126, 136, 139; **Joy:** Psalm 119:35, 47, 62, 111, 162, 171; **Sorrow:** Psalm 43:5; 119:136; 119:153; **Pleasure:** Psalm 16:3, 6, 11; **Appreciation of**

mantic dream, and then taken on tiptoe into some mysterious valley.

A much more crude illustration is that a good fighter in the ring will vary his punches. He will box defensively, and move about lightly, drawing his opponent cunningly into an unguarded moment when he will unexpectedly land an uppercut that sends the other reeling; then he will draw back, keeping his own guard, and once again will lure his opponent into a moment of hesitation when a straight left will again send his opponent reeling; but this time, he will follow it up with another powerful blow and another, until he gets either a knock-out or the towel is thrown in.

We have to go for that knock out! We have to box for it with skill and patience, waiting the opportunity the Holy Spirit will give, perhaps not until the ninth or tenth round, after a long, exhausting fight that has sapped our strength and demanded more than we thought we could ever give. Such is our address to the minds and consciences of men and women.

Choosing hymns

The second lesson regards the hymns we choose. I know that we are aware hymns should have *reasonable poetry* and be set to *singable music*. But there is a third criterion. It is that any hymn we use must have *Biblical content*. It must have sound theology embedded within it.

Singing is a crucial pathway to our people's minds. As well as providing an opportunity for adoration, singing should be part of a grand campaign of enlightenment. Go back for a moment to my earlier comments about emotional singing. I have no problem with a certain kind of emotional singing. My problem is when people sing their heads off but by-pass their minds in so doing. Spiritual singing (which will certainly be emotional—how could it not be, when God has created us emotional beings!), will be with understanding of words that express the mighty doctrines of grace.

If you long for better singing from your congregations, go for their minds.

Because the greater our appreciation of the salvation of our God, the loftier will be our praises of him. Flat, dull, lifeless singing almost always points to a congregation untaught in the truth of Scripture. The key to praise lies through the mind.

Avoid slush

Please don't allow your congregations to sing pap and slush. I have been in gatherings where grown adults, educated people, have been expected not only to sing words which could have been written by McGonagall, to music which was so bad that it made me wince, but also words which were vacuous, banal and often such bad theology as to be misleading, if not altogether false. (What, for example, is the Biblical warrant for singing, 'Make my flesh life melt away'?) Because the item being sung had been in introduced by some platitudinous rubbish, people felt obliged to join in, though they felt somehow this was little more than sentimentality.

I suspect that some of the modern song-writers are undermining true

must do that. We must 'instruct', that is, show the relevance of what Amos said 800 years *before* Christ for the people of God 2000 years *after* Christ. We do that, but also preach with emotion. Preach with fire. Fire that warms. Fire whose flames bring corpses from the stiff cold lifeless state of their deadness to stir and know the power of the Holy Spirit beginning to flow in their veins. Fire whose flames cast light into the darkest places.

Oh, preach with fire! Don't climb those pulpit steps unless and until the fire of God burns in your soul. For it is as we bring together into holy union our theology and the fire of holy emotion that the words we speak will cut to the heart, and will reach the consciences and wills of those listening.

One final thought. Many of our people are longing for us to speak to them like that. They are crying out for a word that will address their minds and tell them about their temptations, their worries, their battles, their sorrows, their joys, their daily work, their families, their homes, their

My preaching for thirty-four years has been based on that paragraph. 'First exposition, then exhortation.'

Christian piety, on the one hand, and implanting seriously false ideas about grace and sanctification on the other hand. Put the hymns you choose through the three sieves: poetry, music and—above all—*content*. Remember, Paul said, *In understanding be men!*

Theology on fire

The final lesson—in a word—is that true preaching is theology on fire. If there is one thing that the Church of God needs today it is theology on fire. If you want to empty your church just preach pure theology. Did Paul ever preach pure theology? I hardly think so. His theology was ablaze with passion and love for God.

Lift Biblical truth into 1995. We

neighbours, their money—and just how all of that comes under the mighty grace and power of God. So preach with fire, the fire of God in your bones, in your hearts and on your lips. So may the Holy Spirit honour and authenticate His written and Incarnate Word.

Notes

- 1 I am indebted to an unpublished MTh Dissertation: *The Cognitive Element of Conversion in the Acts of the Apostles*, Terence J Harkin, New College, 1994.
- 2 *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Kittel, Vol 3, p 703.

Historical Sermons

The Sin unto Death

a sermon by Andrew Bonar

The sin mentioned here is not the same as the *sin against the Holy Ghost*. The persons spoken of, in the latter sin, are the Scribes and Pharisees—it is the malignant enemies of Christ who are the criminals. In the former sin, that is, the case before us in our text, it is a Christian brother that is the offender: *If any man see his brother sin*. We must beware of confounding the two sins and the two parties. The sin unto death is spoken of as that which a believer could commit; but no believer could possibly be guilty of the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost.

Can we fall from grace?

This clears the way so far, or at least it narrows the ground, and so facilitates

If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is sin not unto death (1 John 5:16, 17).

Death may mean either temporal or eternal death; either the death of the soul, or that of the body. In the passage before us, it seems to me to mean the latter. The sin unto death, would mean a sin involving temporal death, though he would not exclude the doer of it from his kingdom.

The difference between these two

the earthly Canaan, were not delivered over to eternal death. Moses himself (we might add Aaron and Miriam) is an example of the same thing. In him we see a believing man suffering temporal death for his sin, yet still a child of God, and an heir of the heavenly Canaan.

God's chastisement

But have we any cases of this kind in the New Testament? If we have, they will tend greatly to confirm our interpretation of the passages before us, and shew that, in all ages, God's way of dealing with his saints has been the same; and that, while in some instances there was chastisement, in the shape of pain, or disease, or loss of property, or loss of friends, in others there was chastisement in the shape of death. In the case of Moses, we have this paternal chastisement, involving death; in the case of Job, we see it involving loss of substance, loss of family, loss of health, but stopping short of death; but in the New Testament, we shall see it in the infliction of death upon the child of God.

The most remarkable instance of the kind is in the Corinthian church. That church was in many respects noble and Christ-like, *coming behind in no gift*. Yet there was much sin in it, and many of its members were not walking as *becometh saints*. Specially in reference to

Does it not assume the possibility of falling from grace, and deny the 'perseverance of the saints'?

our inquiry. While removing one difficulty, does it not introduce another? Does it not assume the possibility of falling from grace, and deny the 'perseverance of the saints'? We think not. But, as much depends on the meaning of the expression, *a sin unto death*. We must first take up this.

kinds of sins may be illustrated by the case of Israel in the desert. The generation that came out of Egypt died in the wilderness, because of their murmurings. Yet many of these were believing men and women, who, though thus chastised by the infliction of temporal death and deprivation of

the Lord's Supper, there was grievous sin, as the latter part of the eleventh chapter of the First Epistle to that church intimates.

God could not suffer such sin in his saints. They are not indeed to be cast away, nor condemned with the unbelieving world; but they are not to be permitted to go on in evil, unrebuked. Accordingly, God interposes. He sends disease on some of these transgressing members, and death on others. *For this cause*, says the apostle, *many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep* (1Cor. 11:30). Weakness, sickness, and death, were the three forms of chastisement with which the Corinthian church was visited. Some were sinning sins which required to be visited with weakness; others were sinning sins which required to be punished with sickness; while others were sinning sins which needed to be chastised with death; for this the word *sleep* evidently means (1 Cor. 7:39–15:18).

Judgement in love

Against these sins unto disease, these *sins unto death*, the apostle warns the Corinthians, when he says, *If we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged*. That is, we might have been spared these chastisements. If we had judged ourselves, and condemned our own sin, we should not have been thus judged by God. Then he adds that even this judgement was in love, not in wrath: *When we are thus judged, it is the Lord chastising us, in order that we may not be condemned with the world*.

We find the same solemn truth in the Epistle of James (5:14, 15): *The prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him*. Here sickness is spoken of as the consequence of sin — sin in a saint. The sick and sinning one is to be prayed for; and if his sin and sickness be not unto death, God will have mercy on him. The sin shall be forgiven, and the sickness taken away.

We find the same truth in 1 Cor. 8:11, *Through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died,*

where the *perishing* is the infliction of temporal death.

These passages show the true meaning of our text. The sin unto death is a sin such as God chastises by the infliction of disease and death.

What this sin is, we do not know. It was not the same sin in all, but different in each. In the case of the Corinthian church, unworthy

Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, *Who art thou?* (See also John 1:21, 25; 5:12; 9:2; 19:21). If thus rendered, the meaning would be, 'I say he is to ask no questions about that.' That is to say, if he sees a brother sick and ready to die, he is not to say, 'Has he committed a sin unto death, or has he not?' He is just to pray, letting alone all such enquiries, and leaving the matter in the

If you want to keep your sin to yourself, it will be your ruin. It will be poison in your veins. It will eat as doth a canker

communicating *was the sin unto death*; but what it was in others, is not recorded.

Thus the passage in John and that in James correspond strikingly, the one illustrating the other. In the case of the sick brother, spoken of by James, we have the very thing referred to in the first clause of our text: *If any man see his brother sin a sin which is not unto death, he shall ask, and he (i.e. God) shall give him life for them that sin not unto death*. Thus the prayer of faith was to save the sick man from death, to raise him up, and to secure for him forgiveness of the sin which had produced the sickness.

A Question

But then the question would arise, How are we to know when a sin is unto death, and when it is not unto death, so that we may pray in faith? The last clause of the 16th verse answers this question. It admits that there is a sin unto death; which admission is thus put in the 17th verse: *All unrighteousness is sin; but all sin is not unto death*. But what does the apostle mean by saying, in the end of the 16th verse, *I do not say that he shall pray for it?* If we cannot know when a sin is unto death, and when not, what is the use of saying, *I do not say that he shall pray for it?*

The word translated *pray* means also *inquire*, and is elsewhere translated so: John 1: 19, *The Jews sent priests and*

hands of God, who, in answer to prayer, will raise him up, if he had not committed the sin unto death.

The passage now becomes plain; and while it remains as an unspeakably solemn warning, it does not teach us that there is some one mysterious sin which infers eternal damnation; still less, that a saint of God can commit such a sin. It may be thus paraphrased: 'If any one see his brother in Christ sin a sin, and see him also laid upon a sickbed in consequence of this, he shall pray for the sick brother; and if his sin be one of which the punishment is disease, not death, the sick man shall be raised up; for all sins that lead to sickness do not necessarily lead to death. And as to the difficulty, "How shall we know when the sin is one which merely infers sickness, and when it is one which infers death?" I say this, ask no questions on this point, but pray, and leave the case to God.'

Let us now come to the lessons of our text.

Lessons from the text

1. Don't puzzle yourself with hard questions about the particular kind of sins committed—be satisfied that it is sin, and deal with it as such. There are sins unto death, and there are sins not unto death. Do not trouble yourself or others with questions on this point, which no man can answer. Remember that all unrighteousness is sin, as a breach of the perfect law of

righteousness, that we have to do. It is not the nature or the measure of its punishment that we have to consider, but its own exceeding sinfulness.

2. Be concerned about a brother's welfare—*Look not every man on his own things, but look also every man on the things of others.* If any of you see a brother sin, do not let him alone, as if it did not concern you. Do not say, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' Desire the spiritual prosperity of all the saints. Seek, too, the salvation of the unsaved. They need your pity and your effort. Do not leave them.

3. Don't trifle with sin—count no sin trivial, either in yourself or another. Do not dally with temptation. Do not extenuate guilt. Do not say, 'May I not keep my beloved sin a little longer?' Part with it, or it will cost you dear. In what way it may do so I do not know. But I can say this, that sooner or later it will cost you dear, both in soul and body.

4. Take it at once to God—don't puzzle yourself with useless questions as to its nature, but take it straight to God. In the case of a brother, do not raise evil reports against him because of it, but go and tell God about it. In your own case do the same. Do not let it remain unconfessed a moment after it is discovered. It is unrighteousness; it is sin; it is breach of law. God hates it; you must hate it too. You must bring it to the God who hates it; and who, just because He hates it, wants you to bring it to Him. Give it at once to Him. He knows how to keep it, and to deal with it.

If you want to keep it to yourself, it will be your ruin. It will be poison in your veins. It will eat as doth a canker. It is not too great for Him to deal with or to cover. The blood of his only begotten Son will cover it. Let that blood prove its divine efficacy by the cleansing which it can administer to your soul. Rest not without forgiveness through the great propitiation. An unforgiven man is an unhappy man. Blessedness is the portion only of the forgiven. If you have not yet found the pardon, this blessedness cannot be yours. If you but felt the misery of the

unpardoned, and the joy of the pardoned, you would not rest till you had made sure of the forgiveness that there is with God, and tasted the reconciliation that they only know, who have settled the great question for eternity, at the foot of the cross.

There is such a thing as The Second Death. And who shall deliver the doomed one from it? Who shall pray him up out of hell? The second death! Ah, when it has come to that, all is over! No Christ will do then; no blood; no cross! Oh, wait not till your sins have landed you in that! Take the proffered pardon. God gives it to you in his Son. Take it, and live forever. He who died and lives presents to you the gift of the everlasting life—life that no second death can touch, life in Himself, life beyond the valley of the shadow of death, in the city of the living one, from which no life departs, and into which no death can enter.

Rev'd Andrew Bonar (1810–92), minister in Collace, Perthshire and Finnieston, Glasgow

Preaching from

It would appear that many think nothing needs to be written specifically on preaching from the Psalms, because it is no different to preaching from any other part of the Bible. The aim can only be to expound the meaning of the text, explain any difficulties present in the passage, and then to apply the teaching of the passage to the hearts and consciences of the congregation. This would seem to be the general attitude of many, including those writing on preaching in general. Indeed, there is a conspicuous absence of literature on preaching from the Psalms.

To allow this lack of attention to this subject this would be to neglect some of the distinctives of the book of Psalms which necessitate fuller consideration of how preaching from it should be approached. The uniqueness of the Psalter marks it off from the rest of Scripture, and its style and content demand special attention.

The greatest difficulty we face is our familiarity with the Psalms. For many Christian people the Psalms, especially well-loved Psalms, are the parts of Scripture they know best. In many branches of the Christian tradition the Psalms are said or sung in a traditional manner. Thus in Anglican churches the Psalms are either read or chanted. In Reformed churches, originating either on the Continent or in Scotland, the Psalms formed either the major, or even the exclusive, part of the sung praise. Other psalms are known because they are now part of the paraphrased poetry of the hymn book, though often their source is unrecognised. Simply because they are used so much does not necessarily mean that they are understood better than other parts of the Bible.

Historical setting

The Psalter remains a difficult book to study because it has an accumulation of problems which we do not face elsewhere in the Old Testament in the same way. For example, when we come to

another book of the Old Testament, such as an historical book like Joshua, or a prophetic book like Ezekiel, we are able to put it in a distinct historical setting.

When we are faced with the Psalter we have a tremendous range of historical settings, so that each psalm has to be interpreted individually. The absence of historical context for a particular psalm makes our task harder as we try to date the period from which it came to see if the historical background helps us to interpret it better. Moreover, we are not just dealing with one type of literature in the Psalms. While we can go to historical, prophetic, and poetical parts of the Old Testament in general, in the Psalter we have all three represented and more.

A little Bible

The Psalter is important, too, because it is a little Bible. Basil in the early church said: 'The book of Psalms contains a complete theology'. The idea in this quotation was taken up in the Reformation era by both Luther and Calvin, and their own personal lives were deeply touched by the book of Psalms. Luther referred to the Psalter as a miniature Bible and that is true. The Psalter brings together the faith of Israel into one book. It forms 'the creed of Israel, sung, not signed', to borrow a phrase of James Denney in reference to credal statements.¹

the Psalms (part 1)

Alan Harman

Difficulties in Approaching the Psalms

Authorship

Coming to the book of Psalms we are soon aware that we are facing problems of interpretation which are not so apparent in other parts of the Bible. For example, instead of coming to a book with a single author the psalms come from a diverse range of authorship. There are many attributed by the titles to David, but others to Solomon, or to the sons of Korah, or even to Moses. Others, with no title, are from unknown authors. There is an historical range among the Psalms from Moses (Ps. 90) to the post-exilic era (Pss 74, 107, 124, 137).

Genre

The range of literature is also daunting. We are not just dealing with narrative, or poem, or prophetic oracle, but with these and other literary forms within the Psalter. The identification of the type or genre of literature in the Psalms has important consequences. Knowing the genre of a particular psalm helps us as we approach it, for if we understand its main characteristics we can look for the distinctive clues within the psalm itself. Moreover, it helps to know that the songs which make up the Psalter can be grouped according to genre, so that we are not faced with the prospect of trying to relate to 150 different types of psalms.

The main psalm genres are the hymn, the lament, the thanksgiving song, the historical psalm, the psalm of trust, the wisdom psalm, and the kingship psalm.²

Historical Context

The absence of historical context often increases our difficulty. In approaching a particular prophetic section it is often possible to fit it into a known historical circumstance, and this throws further light on the statements in the text. Many psalms, however, lack any indication of historical context, and all we know about them has to be gleaned from within the psalm itself. On the other hand this may have advantages, as losing the psalm from a context frees it for wider use and application.

Another difficulty we face is a personal one. There is the ever-present temptation present to take little nuggets from the psalms and deal with them in an isolated fashion. We extract a couple of verses from a psalm, divorce them entirely from the context, yet gain spiritual benefit from them. Our theological framework may be right, but our choice of text to support it is unfortunate and should have been replaced by a more suitable one. The end result is that we avoid the hard work of exegeting the whole psalm and understanding the real message of the whole psalm (see below under The Form and Structure of the Psalms).

Imprecatory psalms

There is another area in which we may feel a personal difficulty. The Psalms deal at times with matters we would rather be silent about. This would include the obvious example of the imprecatory psalms, but there are other ones as well. For example, many preachers would feel very reticent in preaching from Psalm 88, with its darkness and despair. These, however, are part of the canon of Scripture and are there for reading, meditation, and as the content of preaching. They are part of 'all Scripture which is breathed-out by God' and which 'is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness' (2 Tim. 3:16). (C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*, contains a most helpful discussion of the imprecatory psalms. Ed.)

The Form and Structure of the Psalms

Hebrew poetry

The Psalter is a poetical book, and our approach to it has to recognise that fact. This means firstly that the language used in the Psalter is different from narrative language, for poetry is 'a kind of language that says more and that says it more intensively than does ordinary language'.³ It is language that is meant to have a profound impact upon us, not lull us gently to sleep! There is a terseness about poetic language which makes it almost telegraphic in its style.

Parallelism

This means too that we must be aware of the distinctives of Hebrew poetry as we come face to face with the text of the Psalms.⁴ It has to be read as a Middle Eastern book of poetry translated into English. In particular we have to recognise poetic features such as parallelism which occur in so many of the Psalms, and also to note recent advances in discussion of them. Ever since Lowth began the modern study of parallelism it has been customary to speak of the most common form of parallelism as being the synonymous variety. Once something has been said, then the same thing is repeated in slightly variant language. This, however, is to seriously underestimate the role which the parallel expression so often plays. As Kugel has pointed out, there is often advance between the two expressions, between A and B. He says: 'A is so, and what's more, B is so.... It is the dual nature of B both to come after A and thus add to it, often particularising, defining or expanding the meaning and yet also to harken back to A and in an obvious way connect to it. One might say that B has both retrospective (looking back to A) and prospective (looking beyond it) qualities.'⁵ This understanding is going to have important implications for many Psalter passages, and it, and other poetic features which have received greater definition in recent decades,

will aid interpretation of the Psalms.

Symmetry

Also, we must come to the Psalms realising that we are dealing with units of the biblical text. The verses of a particular psalm are not just discrete verses which happen to be juxtaposed. They fit together because they are parts of units which often have a definite symmetry to them. There are various types of psalms, and each one has its own distinctive style. A lament differs markedly from a hymn of praise, and it in turn differs from a psalm written in a wisdom style. Recognition of the distinctive features increases our understanding of individual psalms. Emphasis on the distinctive style of the psalms helps to bring us back to approaching them (and preaching from them) as units. This is also emphasised by other stylistic features, such as the presence of acrostic psalms in the Psalter. As alphabetic psalms they were clearly intended to be understood as units in their own right. Hence even Psalm 119, the longest of the acrostic psalms, is made up of twenty-two sub-units.

What difference should this make to our preaching? It should ensure that we do not isolate a verse from its context for preaching and devotional purposes. A verse only has meaning in its context. This is the form in which God has given us the Psalms, and any exegetical practice which does not recognise that is going contrary to the God-given structure of the biblical text.

Metaphors

We must also recognise that the poetic style is full of similes and metaphors. Metaphors, in particular, are very important, because they ensure that appeal is made to our minds. When we read them our minds have to be involved to work out their meaning. They are also attractive to us because of their graphic nature. Moreover, they often touch our emotions for their appeal is to our senses. Since we have so many metaphors in the Psalters, we also have many concrete things to deal

with such as rocks, lions, bulls, streams of water. The psalms are never abstract, always concrete. A problem many face in expounding the psalms is that they slip immediately into abstractions. Much of the concreteness has to stay in our presentation, in order that the message might also make its impact very forcefully.

Emotions

Another distinctive feature of the Psalms is their intensely emotional element and we must take this into account in our presentation of their message. There is no part of the Bible which portrays so vividly the varied experiences and emotions of the human heart. The psalmists lay bare their hearts for others to see. To use the illustration which Athanasius and Calvin both used, the psalms are a mirror which reflect all parts of the soul. Sermons on the psalms which do not carry over this aspect fall far short. 'To preach a passionless sermon on these passionate poems is a contradiction in terms'.⁶ (To be continued).

Notes

- 1 Letters of Principal James Denney to His Family and Friends, Hodder & Stoughton, p.9
- 2 Tremper Longman III, *How to read the Psalms*, IVP 1988, pp.24-35.
- 3 Laurence Perrine, *Soul and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, 2nd ed. Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963, p.24.
- 4 For good surveys of the poetic elements which must be taken into account when we come to preach from the Psalms, see Tremper Longman III, *op. cit.*, pp.89-122, and Walter C Kaiser Jr., *Toward an Exegetical Theology: Biblical Exegesis for Preaching and Teaching*, Zondervan, 1981, pp.211-31.
- 5 J.I.Kugel, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, p.8.
- 6 C.J.Sedgwick, *Preaching from the Psalms*, ET 103, 1991-92, pp.361-364.

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Prayer

Prayer

Prayer

by

George Philip

Prayer is evangelism shorn of all its carnal attractions and satisfactions. Many look for and expect a considerable pleasure element, a carnal self-expression and even an entertainment factor in much modern evangelistic activity. Those who make prayer the basic priority of personal and congregational life tend to be accused of 'doing nothing' in the face of the tremendous need for the proclamation of the Gospel of salvation to a world that is ignorant and perishing. Of course, those who are 'activists' in evangelism in its various forms are often the people who are eager to send information to church prayer meetings with earnest appeals to be prayed for. They recognise the need for prayer but do not seem to be disposed to be numbered among those who can be counted on to be part of the prayer life of the congregation. There is something inconsistent in that attitude.

Costly involvement

There seems to be a 'blind spot' among some evangelical believers regarding the nature and importance of prayer,

involved. Preaching is not and cannot ever be a 'one-man' activity. In the great passage on spiritual warfare where Paul speaks of the Word of God as the sword the Holy Spirit uses, he urges the company of believers in Ephesus to pray for him that utterance might be given to him in preaching God's truth as it ought to be proclaimed (Eph. 6:19, 20).

Contrast these words of Paul's with what is apt to happen when the preacher is obviously having a struggle in the pulpit. Christians in the congregation tend to be critical. After all, they feel they are being deprived of their 'diet' of the Word and the blessing they expect. They are thinking of themselves not of any unconverted, needy people who may be in the congregation. Criticism is easy, so is 'switching-off'; but to get instantly involved, without an outward show of spirituality, and to pray for liberty of utterance for the preacher is costly. That is being involved in evangelism

to pray for liberty of utterance for the preacher is costly. That is being involved in evangelism without any carnal satisfaction

even among those who emphasise the importance of the Word of God and the need for sound doctrine clearly and systematically preached. But it is clear in Scripture that preaching and prayer are fundamentally united, so that both preacher and congregation are vitally

without any carnal satisfaction. Of course, if the preacher has failed to prepare thoroughly both himself and his material for preaching, he needs to be prayed for even more. He has not taken seriously the command of Jesus, 'Feed my sheep'.

Vast Issues

We are urged to pray for an open door for the Word (Col. 4:2-4), not just in terms of liberty for the preacher, but in terms of preparing and opening the minds and hearts of those who will hear, so that faith will indeed come through the hearing of the Word (Rom. 10:17). But this calls for prayer on yet another level. We must pray that God, by the constraint of his Holy Spirit, will draw people into places where they will hear the Gospel, and that in answer to prayer they will come prepared by God. They may not in fact expect to meet God and to be met by him, but that is what happens, or should happen, whenever the Word is preached. However, sad to say, even Christian believers can come to church without any real expectation of meeting with God and of being spoken to by God. But in a church, be it big or small, well known or unknown, recognised as sound and biblical or not, if there is prayer at its heart then there will be an awareness of the presence of God in such a way that even hard, worldly, indifferent people will sense the difference. This makes a church Prayer Meeting, as it prays for the services on the Sunday, a truly exciting thing. We are called to be workers together with God.

When Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica, which at the beginning had had only a few short weeks of ministry, he had no hesitation in asking that church to be his prayer-partner. He believed that even at that early stage in their Christian life and experience they would recognise the importance of being a praying church. In 2 Thessalonians 3:1(RSV) he asked them to pray 'that the Word of the Lord may speed on and triumph as it

did among you'. In the AV the appeal is 'that the Word of the Lord may have free course and be glorified'. The NIV reads rather dully, 'that the message of the Lord may spread rapidly and be honoured.' But this is not in any sense a call to a congregation to pray for and to be concerned only for its own people, situation and service. It was to the Thessalonians in their day and to us in ours a summons to lift up our eyes to the field of the world that is always ripe unto harvest. In every generation, individuals, families, communities and nations reap the harvest of what has been sown by those who have gone before and, at the same time, there is a sowing of seed which the next generation will reap in due time. Since this is so, even more prayer is needed after the preaching of the Word than before it, so that the seed of the Word, watered by prayers, may take root and bring forth fruit. The issues are so vast and so solemn that we should be driven to prayer.

No Presumption

There is nothing artificial about prayer, nor is there anything presumptuous in prayer, as if we were either telling God what he must do or demanding that he should do certain things more or less at once in answer to our prayers. What there is and must be in prayer is an awareness of God and of the fact that we are dealing with God and being dealt with by him. A good illustration of this is found in the story of David in 2 Samuel 7:18-29. King David sat in the presence of God and marvelled at the fact of God's call, God's hand on him, and the way God had led him thus far in his life. He pondered God's goodness, God's purposes and God's promises and in response he yielded himself gladly to God. On that basis, looking to the future, he found that God had put it in his heart to pray in clear and specific terms. That is the prayer of faith.

Of course, the prayer of faith is by no means always clear and sure about all the details. On one occasion David prayed simply and earnestly, 'Oh Lord, do Thou for me' (Ps. 109:21 AV).

There was no specific request, only a plea that God would act. When we are not sure, it is always best to leave it to God. In the story of Daniel's young friends we find the same balance of faith (Dan. 3:16-18). These servants of God stated the fact: 'Our God is able to deliver'. They stated their

2:17-19). In Acts 12:5-17, when Peter was kept in prison, prayer was made by the church and when that prayer was answered, Peter, on his release, knew exactly where the church prayer meeting was being held. When the disciples were publicly shown to be powerless and ineffective in the face of

if we are not men and women of prayer in private, then our prayers in public may well become something of a ritual

confidence in God: 'and He will deliver'. Then they said, 'But if not, we still will not yield'. They were not 'hedging their bets' to explain 'unanswered' prayer. They were simply accepting that the whole of the life of faith, prayer life included, we know only in part. We are limited in our knowledge of how and when and to what extent God will act. If the answer to a prayer is 'No', as it was to the mother of James and John when she asked for 'positions' for them, we must accept that God knows best and that others and ourselves will be blessed as a result.

Private and Corporate

That there is a vital connection between our personal prayer life and the prayer life of the congregation must be obvious, just as there is a vital connection between prayer in a crisis and prayer as part of ongoing life. If we are not men and women of prayer in private, then our prayers in public may well become something of a ritual or even a performance which has more to do with impressing people than with speaking to God and sharing the burden of spiritual responsibilities. When faced with crisis, engineered by the agents of evil, Daniel prayed as he had done before (Dan. 6:10). There was no sudden flurry of prayer.

Personal prayer leads on naturally to corporate prayer. In one situation Daniel went at once to share with and ask the prayers of his friends (Dan.

the appeal of need, Jesus told them that the problem was the prayerlessness of their own lives (Mark 9:28, 29). Illustrations abound in Scripture to show that prayer and the moving of the power of God belong together and cannot be separated.

Moreover, the sheer dimension of the need calls for corporate prayer, for the church to pray as the church. Individually our capacity for remembering, understanding and persisting is limited. But when we come together as the church to pray we are manning the power-house under the guidance of God. We are involved in the outworking of the will of God on earth; and from one insignificant locality (insignificant in the eyes of the world and often the eyes of the organised church) we range the whole wide world in prayer. When we pray we are in a most basic way involved with God. The sheer scale of it is staggering and the significance of the church at prayer is well expressed in the words, 'The prayers of the saints are the decrees of God beginning to work' (Luther). It is God by His Holy Spirit who prompts us in our praying, inspiring us to pray and to ask in faith, and by that same Holy Spirit we are enabled to pray (Rom. 8:26).

The Heart of Prayer

Illustrations also abound to make plain that the people who truly pray in faith are people who have learned what God is like. The heart of prayer and

indeed the importance of prayer is not our faith, nor our earnestness, but the reality, the glory, the grandure, the power, the love and the faithfulness of the God to whom we pray. On a human level we do not 'open up' to people we do not really know and it is as we come to know God in his Word, and in our experience through his Word, that we begin to pray. Read the prayer of good king Hezekiah in 2 Kings 19:15-19, how he spread the matter of concern before the Lord and addressed his God as the one enthroned above the mercy seat. Hezekiah had urged his people to have confidence in this God (2 Chron. 32:7-9), and yet, later in his life, the king himself, proud of his successes, fell away from God. Read the prayer of Ezra (Ezra 9:4-15) and the prayer of Daniel (Dan. 9:3-19) and see the sense of awe and worship as these men drew near to their God in prayer and spoke with the Almighty. From them we must learn the greatness of God, but we must not try to copy their experiences of awe. When we 'work up' experiences these tend to be suspect, human rather than spiritual, psychological rather than God-given.

Discretion

There is both safety and enablement in coming together as a church to pray, but there can also be problems. There is a need for discretion in what we pray for because not all needs, our own and those of others, should be laid bare for public exposure. Personality and privacy must not be violated. There are also things and people which should be prayed for at home in our own prayers because our personal cares and involvements are not the responsibility and burden of the church Prayer Meeting. If only the person praying has any knowledge of what is being prayed for the rest may hope they can agree and say Amen, but they are in the dark. There is also need for discretion in how we pray. We may be familiar with people's surnames and locations but those more recently attending the Prayer Meeting may not know, and simple things like

mentioning locations and names can help others far more than we realise. There is also a sharing in prayer and this must not be frustrated, for example, by one person always praying in detail for the same one area of the work. We may have a real and loving burden for the services in our own congregation, but so have others, and we should allow them sometimes to have the privilege of that part of intercession while we pray perhaps with more difficulty for some piece of work from which there has been little recent information. Perhaps we also need to consider that those able to express themselves easily in words may multiply words, particularly when they are tired, and make their prayers so long that they dishearten others and shut them out from participation.

Encouragement

We need encouragement to pray. Yes, we must worship and bow down before God, banishing from our attitude all familiarity, and yet we must allow God to encourage us, so that we will thrill to the business of speaking to and with God. Think of the encouragements in Isaiah 40—the strong Shepherd who carries the lambs with such tenderness. Little wonder God goes on to say, 'Is there anyone like me?' Do we take time in our praying to lift up our eyes to consider the God who calls the stars by name? Can this God really be bothered listening to the likes of us? He gives power to the faint and renews their strength: This great and mighty God is the God who loves with everlasting love (Jer. 31:3), and who has plans laid to give us a future (Jer. 29:11). He is indeed great and glorious and yet when the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray he said, 'When you pray, say Father.' And the Holy Spirit within us urges us to pray and say, 'Abba, Father' (Rom. 8:15). It brings prayer into the realm of great simplicity and personal interest and care. But what a Father we pray to! Paul describes him as the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory (Eph. 1:15ff.) and the Father from whom every family in

heaven and earth is named and who is able to do far more abundantly than all we ask or think (Eph. 3:14ff.).

Spiritual Warfare

It is so clear from the life of our Lord Jesus Christ that the beginning of prayer is speaking to a loving, heavenly Father in whose love we trust and in whose will we delight. But it is clear from Jesus' life that prayer is also the ongoing battle of life and not just the quiet moments of fellowship with God. At the grave of Lazarus; as He approached the time of his death; and in the Garden of Gethsemane; just as in the Temptation at the beginning of His life and ministry, we find Jesus troubled and agonised in spirit. Think of the words in Hebrews 5:7 regarding Jesus' strong crying and tears in the context of prayer. Prayer is not a game, nor is it pleasure, it is spiritual warfare and when any given battle is won, that is not the signal that prayer can cease. Think of Jesus, for example, in the demands, confrontations and ministry in the day recorded in Mark 1. It was a productive victorious day but right after it, very early in the morning, no doubt aware that the new day would bring fresh demands, we find Jesus again at prayer. Perhaps we all make the mistake of stopping our prayers too soon. We are counselled to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17 AV), to be instant in prayer (Rom. 12:12 AV), to be alert to the needs and to persevere in prayer (Eph. 6:18). In a sermon on prayer, George Adam Smith made the searching point that 'disbanded soldiers make dangerous citizens'. Christians who once prayed but do so no longer can prove to be the sorest critics and the bitterest enemies.

If we are to continue in faithful Christian discipleship and be effective in evangelism we do well to ask, 'Lord, teach us to pray'.

Revd George Philip, minister of Sandyford Henderson Memorial Church, Glasgow

Andrew Bonar: Reflections

(This paper was originally given at a Rutherford House seminar to illustrate the depth of grief ministers can undergo when bereavement strikes)

It is a long time since last I read *Andrew Bonar-Diary and Life*. A chance glance over my son's bookshelf revealed the book and brought back memories of a deep impression that it had made on my reading of it in student days. I eagerly sought to borrow it and am glad that I did, for, if anything, this book, or possibly the life that it conveys, impresses me more than ever.

I have a natural affection for him, for his first ministry was spent in the Valley of Strathmore, not all that far from where I was brought up, and where I first learned of the great days of revival under McCheyne, Burns, Milne and Andrew Bonar. Recently driving through Collace again, and down into the little village of Kinrossie where Bonar lived and where his little church is now the community hall I felt my heart warmed at the remembrance of what once happened in these quiet hamlets last century.

His First Charge

Bonar came as colleague and successor to a man whom in his diary he refers to as the 'old minister'. Relations were not very cordial and at his ordination it was his prayer that with 'affection for his people' he might also have 'anxiety

about the old minister's soul'. As the diary unfolds, the relationship seems to have continued frosty with the 'old minister' remaining aloof from the movement of the Spirit which saw, at the end of Bonar's ministry, more than 500 gathering for communion.

Bonar's ordination was attended with a profound sense of God's blessing on his soul. McCheyne, Robert Macdonald, Mr Candlish, Frank Gillies, James Lewis, as well as his brothers were there 'While their hands lay upon me, and the words of prayer ascended, I felt like one for whom very strong intercession was going up to God to the very highest heavens, and in great calmness and strong desire I gave myself to God my Saviour, and expected henceforth His promised Spirit.'

From his earliest days in Collace he longed to see people converted and was greatly encouraged when a young woman called Elizabeth Morrison became a Christian. She was the first of many, especially as the movement of God's Spirit spread throughout the area, greatly increased by the ministry of William Burns while both Bonar and McCheyne were in the Holy Land. On 3rd February 1840 he has an interesting note on Burns. 'The lesson God is teaching me is this, that William Burns is used as an instrument where others have been labouring in vain, because he is much in prayer,

beyond all of us. It is not the peculiar words he uses that God blesses.'

Not that there was not difficulty and opposition. The 'old minister' remained a thorn in his side, but also after three years he writes: 'There is stronger opposition and bitterness on the part of the ungodly just now than ever, but God's people are more decided and more prayerful.'

As the Disruption approached there was deep pain among these godly men. On November 13th of 1842 he writes of his communion. 'A great multitude from various places, besides the parish round, and Perth and Dundee. Calm, pleasant weather added to our comfort. Perhaps this is the last such day before our Church is broken up. Our servant was so affected that she could not go to the Table. Many children were present.

Death of McCheyne

But one event was to occur before the Disruption which put even that event in the shade for the death of McCheyne would impact and influence Bonar's life from its occurrence until his own death so many years later. On 25th March 1843 he expresses his feelings. 'This afternoon about five o'clock, a message has just come to tell me of Robert McCheyne's death. Never, never yet in all my life have I felt anything like this. It is a blow to myself, to his people, to the Church of Christ in Scotland. O Lord, work, for

on his

Alastair Morrice

Diary

Thine own glory's sake. Arise, O Lord, the godly ceaseth and the faithful fail. My heart is sore. It make me feel death near myself now. Life has lost half its joys, were it not the hope of saving souls. There was no friend whom I loved like him. I have been feeling lately very much my evil neglect of privileges and opportunities, and my very small degree of holiness. This startles me. It is as if God were striking myself. Perhaps He may be taking me next. The same fever may come to me now, but the time at any rate is short. Rode down to Dundee as requested'. The scenes of mourning at St Peter's were overwhelming and he was much used in the consequent funeral and services. There was for him a sense that he was McCheyne's successor and that a great responsibility fell on him. 'How very unlike Robert am I! 2 Kings ii much in my mind. O that his mantle would fall upon me!' It may be that spiritually it did indeed fall upon him, though there were a whole group of godly men who might together be deemed the successors of McCheyne. He was asked to be McCheyne's successor in St Peter's but declined nomination.

On 30th September of that year he began to write the Memoir of McCheyne which was to exercise a widespread and profound influence on Scottish Christianity. It was finished by 23rd December and he rejoiced that he had been permitted to 'finish this record of His beloved servant'.

As 1844 began he was alarmed at the inefficiency of his work. 'No year has been more remarkable for awakening of souls here, but very few of these were awakened by my sermons, most of them were awakened in a way that quite proved the Lord's hand without my words. Perhaps I have never yet begun to preach'. It is humbling for us to read these words...his ministry was being used to a wonderful extent by almost any modern reckoning, and that in a place which was out of the mainstream of life.

Marriage

On the 14th of May 1847 he was

engaged to Isabella Dickson. There is only a short entry. 'I am not worthy of the least of His mercies. May the Lord keep all things henceforth in their place; earthly affection forming but an undercurrent to the divine'. On 4th of April 1848 he was married. 'Through the day many thoughts of the past, and occasionally a sort of thrill of gladness. I thought in my case "the course of true love had run smooth" because we had tried to acknowledge the Lord, and keep each other in our place. At midday prayer with William Dickson. Mr Charles Brown at the marriage prayed for Christ's personal presence, which made me realise Him as one of the company'.

If the engagement and marriage are sparsely commented on, what is said is deeply significant. They sought to honour God and keep each other 'in our place'. God was to remain central, but doubtless they had already discovered that making Him central does not diminish the bonds of earthly love and in the rest of the Diary the deep love which he had for his 'dear Isabella' is one of the most moving tributes to a heavenly Father's gift of married love.

Children were born and on 4th February 1855 he writes of the baptism of 'little Marjory'. His brother John conducted the service. 'These

his ministry in Collace. His name was well known and his influence expanding though he himself remained painfully aware of his failures. On 24th August 1856 he announced to his people that he would be leaving them.

The parting was an emotional one. His people loved him, many had been converted through his ministry, and his years there had been in his marriage and family wondrously happy. All of which he acknowledged with gratitude. But there is something very moving about the record of departure from Collace. 'Left Collace this morning at half-past nine. Sad, solemn feeling spread over me as I rode along, and passed for the last time as one among them, those houses and roads so familiar to me. My heart was full. The sun was shining very sweetly as if to cheer and to remind me that my God has been, and will still be, my joy. Read Psalm xxiii and sang Psalm cxxi before coming away'.

The scene in Glasgow was altogether different from Collace. Glasgow was a burgeoning industrial city. He came to be missionary in Finnieston which was for the Free Church then an area of Church Extension. On December 9th 1856 he began to survey the district. 'Multitudes of souls, very few indeed that

How very unlike Robert am I... O that his mantle would fall upon me!

drops of water coming down upon her are a token of that love descending upon her in the presence of us, the parents. I felt oneness with the child, and so also felt that I could claim for her all I got myself. Lord give me to believe very firmly'.

The Move to Glasgow

In April of that year there were moves to encourage him to go to Glasgow. He had been occupied not only with preaching but with writing. Nettleton's Life, the Commentary on Leviticus and various other smaller books were the fruit of his hand during

even seek to know the Lord. Unless I go forth among them, filled with the Holy Spirit, I see that all will be vain'.

It was in Glasgow that Bonar would act as a catalyst for visiting evangelists and preachers. Early on it was Brownlow North, much later it was D. L. Moody. But clearly his labour was concentrated upon Finnieston where a new church in time was erected and gradually through his ministry was filled. It was here that he experienced the great sorrows of his life first in the loss of a son, Andrew on April 1st 1860 as a result of the scarlet fever epidemic which had swept the city and

led to the death of many children. (James had caught it too, but survived). The night before his death Isabella and Andrew sat up with him. 'Isabella and I have tried to put the little lamb into the Shepherd's hands, as on the day of his baptism. It was all I could do at his bedside last night.' On the morning of his death, he writes, 'It was beautiful sunrise as he departed, and he has gone

motherless, to divine care and sympathy. He spoke of baptism preaching all the promises of God to the believer. He spoke of our depositing the child in the bosom of the Godhead. There were circumstances of deep solemnity. I saw my children were all deeply moved. I came home feeling all the way an indescribable sadness, and yet as if a hand were underneath holding me

O for a day of Pentecost this year, to make me as unlike my former self as were the apostles before that day...

to better sunshine, both rest and refreshment. Though watching from 11 last night till 6.30 this morning, yet when the moment came and we saw his countenance suddenly change, and all struggle sink into calm, I cannot tell how it went through my heart. Lord, shall I not abhor sin that brought in this death, and shall I not long for resurrection? Come and destroy death, be its plague and the grave's destruction. Come, Lord, and wipe away all tears. Come, Lord, cast death and hell into the lake. Come quickly. I was able to preach all day! Surely that must have been a triumph of grace in itself for it is clear from the way he wrote that he felt it very deeply, and went on mourning with Isabella over the loss of their son.

The loss of his wife

But it was the loss of Isabella herself that shook Bonar to the depths of suffering, and is written of movingly in his diaries of 1864. He writes on October 15th 'Oh what a wound! Last night most suddenly, after three hours sinking, my dear dear Isabella was taken from me. Lord pour in comfort, for I cannot. It needs the Holy Ghost to work at such a time...' She had died three weeks after the birth of their little daughter, probably from some post natal complication although it is not recorded. A few weeks later he writes of the baptism which must have been a moving occasion. 'My brother John most fervently commended her, as

up.' At first the grief was like a torrent but after a few weeks, it settled 'into a calm river'. 'Once or twice I have felt myself so helped to bear my sorrow that it was as if there had been a direct breathing of power or influence upon my spirit, it came so gently and so calmly bore me up. "It is the Lord".'

The following year he records his feelings on the anniversary of her death. 'Ever memorable day to me! I do not think there has been a whole day that has passed since this night last year in which I have not, at one time or other, called up my dear Isabella to memory. Blessed be the Lord for the many ways in which He has strengthened me, especially by filling my hand with work and showing me much of His Spirit's presence and power in souls'.

The pain of her loss stayed with him all his life. On October 14th 1888 is the record: 'This time, twenty four years ago! Himself with me has been quiet consolation in the day of sorrow' Two years later, he records on the same day: 'Ever memorable. This time twenty six years ago, what a night to be remembered!'

What stands out is the deep love which he had for his wife, a love which never moved through all the years without her, and the sense of a perennial sorrow that he carried. Yet it is said of him that he spread joy and happiness wherever he went, never, it seems betraying for a moment the secret sorrow of heart. He was a man

of rare grace and beauty of character, not least formed by the way in which he bore the great sorrow. It would be a mistake to think that he often spoke of it. Apparently he did not, just as he rarely referred to the passing of McCheyne, but that he felt it till the day of his own death is undoubted from the frequency of the references in his diary where his private thoughts were expressed. It gave him a yearning for heaven, which as the years passed intensified, often mystified that he was left on earth so long.

Ongoing zeal for the Work

In 1877 though he rejected the nomination at first on the grounds that he was unworthy of such a position and honour, he was appointed as Moderator of the Free Church Assembly. By 1882 he had been 25 years in Finnieston and his office bearers insisted on recognising it. 'There is a littleness about all my doings that distresses me. I would fain have a full heart, fervent love, burning zeal. But in all these I am wanting. O for a day of Pentecost this year, to make me as unlike my former self as were the apostles before that day of the Spirit's outpouring!' By then he was 72, and still seeking a fullness of God's power, a fresh equipping for service.

He lived in good health another 10 years and died peacefully at the very end of 1892. 'A look of inexpressible peace, almost of delighted surprise, rested on his face, as if he had suddenly and unexpectedly found himself in the presence of his much loved Lord and master'. On 4th January 1893, 'Men and women and little children who loved him followed through the snow to Sighthill cemetery, where he was laid to rest beside his wife and his little boy. Within sight of the great city where so long he lived and laboured, he lies waiting for the day of "our gathering together unto Him"—that day for which he longed and prayed'.

He being dead, yet speaketh.

Revd Alastair Morrice is minister of Stonelaw Parish Church, Glasgow

Pastoral Skills

Visitation

I want you to imagine an eager young minister and a recently commissioned deaconess setting out to visit their people. Though they go with some trepidation, they are nonetheless full of hope that pastoral opportunities will come their way. What they may not expect in those very early days of visitation is that they are beginning a hard task which will tax their physical, mental and spiritual resources to the limit.

Visiting demands time and resilience. Those we will have to visit may not always be those we would naturally choose to be with. We can expect our visiting to be met, not only with joys, but also with sorrows, frustrations and anger—often on the same afternoon. There have been days when, despite my careful plans to make several calls in one locality, I have

returned home quite drained and exhausted because a single visit demanded from me all my energy.

Emotional swings

As we move from one home to another, we will undoubtedly find ourselves encountering family situations which are completely different. We will be called on to enter into great sadness, and then be in a home where there is joyful celebration. My own minister told me how on one occasion, having shared in the happiness of a newborn, healthy baby, he next had to face the heartache of a family with completely unexpected news of a life-threatening illness. These swings from one powerful emotion to another call for a very deep self-giving which can be costly for the visitor.

We must not expect to have experienced for ourselves all the hurts and joys of those we visit, but one of the most testing, and yet rewarding, aspects of being a visitor is to be able to think our way sensitively and imaginatively into the pastoral issues we meet. For some visitors, that can at times be too painful! Empathising can be costly in both time and emotion, but when we do empathise we are able to have an internal response and receptiveness to the sufferings and joys of others. Our verbal and practical

response will show whether or not we understand the person's predicament.

The angry member

It can take many years of pastoral work to discover that an aggressive attitude towards the visitor may have a hidden, unseen cause. A previous bad experience or hurt may be at the root of unpleasant behaviour. I remember an elderly man who felt he had been wronged by a previous minister. Though I was in no position to be either judge or jury of his grievance, he had nursed a grudge against the church, and consequently against God, for many years. Whenever anyone from the church called on him, he invariably gave violent expression to his intense dislike of, and disgust with, all things spiritual. Many an elder (and several ministers too) had left his home with very bruised feelings!

How do we cope with such negative responses? If we can begin to understand the root causes of such aggression, it may be that we will bring to that person the first tentative offer of forgiveness. Who knows but that our faithful visits, with friendly questions and empathetic listening, which we ourselves may have thought completely unproductive, may be the beginnings of the first, faltering acceptance of our Lord.

Making visits personal

How must Helen Keller have felt to have been without sight, hearing or speech, our basic communication skills? She hadn't what we take for granted as vital to our everyday existence. Theologians tell us that when the man and woman were created in God's image, they were created essentially as inter-personal beings. God Himself is 'inter-Personal'—God said, 'Let us create man in our own image.' Communication is a gift God saw Adam needed. No animal God had made was

**The
second in
a series of
three articles
by Elizabeth Frost**

congenial company for him. Hence the gift of a fellow human, also in God's image.

In all aspects of our lives we interact with each other, often leaving lasting impressions on one another. Our church visitation is no exception. Attitudes can very quickly be transmitted by our communication both verbally and non verbally (as we

with homework or about to prepare the evening meal. To visit an elderly person early in the morning or after dark could either cause embarrassment or fear. We must be aware of our people's life-style. A little thoughtfulness is important, even if it means we can't visit two people in the same street on the same day! Their needs must have priority over what may be

will you be shocked if I suggest watching Top of the Pops, or buying a popular magazine that young people are into?

saw in the last article). Those we are visiting quickly sense the level of our concern, whether or not they consciously articulate it. We cannot hide lack of interest, any more than we can conceal real compassion.

There are simple steps we can take to help us foster a caring spirit. When we visit someone it is important that we remember some details of what we are told—an expected birth of a first grandchild, a family holiday, or where a son or daughter lives and works, even the name of the family pet! We can then make intelligent enquiries on a future visit. I find it useful to keep a filing card for each family and so have some details to look up before I visit again. Many elders I know keep a small hard-back notebook for those on their Districts, and after an evening of visitation, they record just a few simple details for future reference. Such personal interest is most important; much more valuable than falling back on conversation about the weather!

Timing

Is it too simplistic to say that our visits should be timed in such a way as not to interfere with the time-table of our host? I know of some who have complained of insensitivity in the timing of their elder's calls. A mother of small children will not feel at ease if we call just as she is about to fetch Johnny from nursery, or if she is busy

easiest for us.

Humility

Understandably, most church visitors have a mind-set that they are there to be of service, not to accept service. Of course, generally that is true. But there are occasions when we should have the humility to allow the person we are visiting to be of service to us! One active senior citizen asked repeatedly if he could help the deaconess by washing her car. At first, she declined very emphatically. But then she realised that his repeated offer was going to be his way of responding to the church's ministry to him and his wife. When at last she agreed to his offer of help, a new bond was formed between that home and the congregation. A simple task like that can lead to a greater opportunity to get alongside an individual. Often, an elderly person who has seen no one for some days is only too pleased to make a cup of tea.

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman in John 4 contains an example of this simple principle. Jesus asked her for a drink of water. Yes, he did use the water to show a greater truth, but may his request not also have been to put the woman at ease. She was able to do something for the stranger, and since his friends had gone to buy food, he had privacy leading to an opportunity for in-depth conversation, which turned out to be life-transforming.

Widening our interests

How wide a variety of interests do we have? Do we take the trouble to read up on subjects which may interest those we visit? Or have we thought of deliberately listening to some programme which we know one of our people listen to? Will you be shocked if I suggest (very occasionally) watching Top of the Pops, or perhaps buying a popular magazine that young people are into, just to help get alongside a teenager in a family you visit? I agree: it's probably not your scene; but those teenagers could well respond to you in a very real way. I've proved it!

One very committed Christian took some considerable trouble to acquaint himself with the ins and outs of cricket, just so he could get to know a young man called Charlie. That young man was consequently won for Christ. He left Cambridge and his cricketing career to go to China as a missionary. Then he went to India. And finally at the age of 54, he went to the heart of Africa. Charles T. Studd, a missionary legend, was converted through someone who deliberately 'widened his interests' to include cricket, so that he could get alongside the young man he wanted to win for Christ.

The very ill

Visiting those who are seriously ill is not at all easy. We may feel very apprehensive and uncomfortable as we sit beside a patient who has had bad news from the doctors. But this should not hinder us from going to see such people. Be careful that the uncomfortable feeling you may have does not make you over talkative. That is a common mistake in such circumstances. Instead, 'listen' to the language of the eyes, the face, the body and the tears; learn the art of translating the 'vibes' accurately. (That kind of 'listening' is an art, and can only be learned by hard work and much practice).

The role of the listener at the bedside of the gravely ill should be to offer only suggestions, not directions or advice. We who are listeners have

no right to intervene, however difficult the cross may be our friend has been called on to carry. It is God who knows and he alone is the one who can change people's lives.

Listening, therefore, calls for discernment to see with the eyes of the Lord Jesus and to hear with his ears, what is being said by the one at whose bedside we are sitting. It is never ours to judge.

Fears of how the illness may effect the person or the family will be very real. Don't bombard them with anecdotal stories: 'I knew a person...' or, 'Why don't you...' This can lead to the visit being visitor-centred. As I have just commented, the great danger for embarrassed and uncomfortable visitors is to talk too much. Beware! Recently I talked with a lady who had been diagnosed as having breast cancer and had embarked on a course of radiotherapy. The doctors had told her they were pleased with her progress and she was content and consequently doing very well. That was until a 'friend' told her of someone she had known who had had breast cancer and was well for just under four years after her diagnosis, until 'secondaries' appeared. Her 'friend' did much damage to the lady's confidence and it took some time, and much hard work on the part of both doctors and counsellors, to heal her paralysing fears of recurrence.

Confidentiality

This is probably the point to mention the importance of confidentiality. It may appear that I am stating the obvious but I am sure Scottish people are no different to the Irish! We Ulster folk tend to suffer quite badly from the malaise of 'gossip'. Is gossip a universal problem which afflicts the Scots as well? What we hear in the homes we visit must always be held as being entrusted to us for our safe keeping. The proverbial 'priest's confidence' must be our confidence too.

We must even guard against giving too much information in our church prayer meeting or house group. Being a minister, deaconess, elder or church

visitor does not give *carte blanche* to tell the others—in whatever context—all about a member. I was with a lady only this week who was very upset that her pastor had told the congregational mid-week meeting that she had a very short time to live. It was done with the best of intentions—so that the fellowship could uphold her in their prayers—but it is so important we ask the permission of the person first before we share any intimate details of illness or family problems. God knows the situation perfectly without our details! If we fail to keep confidences, word will quickly get around that 'one should be very careful what is said to Mr...! Unfortunately, I know more than one church visitor with whom nothing of any consequence is shared any longer. The sad fact is that they have never realised why!

The unemployed

To be unemployed can make one have a crisis of identity, a feeling of failure, even worthlessness, whether it is the young graduate who is told his skills are too specialised or the school leaver who is told she must have experience in order to find a job (the never-ending vicious circle of so many of the young unemployed). Without employment, we never enjoy that self-confidence that develops when we

taken time to think of suggesting they find some other meaningful pastime, and even taken steps to help them on the way?

Has it ever occurred to you how often, when we are meeting someone for the first time, we ask, 'What do you do?', meaning, of course, what paid employment do they have. That question can be a real conversation stopper if the person is unemployed! Do we really believe that someone's occupation reflects their worth as an individual? Our innocent question may inadvertently reinforce the feeling of hopelessness that unemployment can bring. We have to learn, therefore, to be sensitive to every situation, especially the home where father and husband is unemployed, and to the position of all the family members whose life-pattern may have had to alter to fit a much smaller weekly budget.

There are so many unspoken questions. For example: how is the mortgage being met? Does the wife find it difficult to have her husband at home all day? How does the family manage at Christmas time? As we slowly gain the confidence of the unemployed person, these are questions it may be possible for us to ask. Or better still, perhaps the answers to some of them will be voluntarily

Unfortunately I know more than one church visitor with whom nothing of any consequence is shared any more

move into our first appointment. Reaching the stage when we are no longer dependent on our parents is a vital part of the maturing process. Never to attain that independence can be a tremendous blow to the ego.

We must try to identify with the unemployed young person. Have you thought of encouraging them to befriend a handicapped person who, for example cannot manage their shopping or garden? Or have you

shared with us. When our friendship advances far enough for that to happen, the privilege we have of winning the confidence of those who confide in us in this way is surely very precious.

John Stott has suggested a definition of work as 'the expenditure of energy (manual, mental or both) in the service of others, which brings fulfilment to the worker, benefit to the community and glory to God' (John Stott, *Issues*

Facing Christians Today, Marshall, Basingstoke, 1984, p162). Remember work is not just paid employment.

Depression

Our worth as persons is based on the fact of God's love for each one of us. For the Christian, it is not just his general love for everyone, but that special love which led him to give his Son for us. The enormity of such a sacrifice reveals the extent and magnitude of his love. If the divine love is reflected in our lives—our faces, our smiles, our words, our listening, our empathy—then maybe it will be experienced by those we visit. Many face very difficult circumstances; the reflection of God's love in us may help avert the spiral of depression that can easily settle into someone's life.

Depression can come as a fleeting disappointment over a couple of hours or days. Or it can envelop the whole personality, leaving the person lacking in self-esteem and living constantly in a shadow, and completely isolated. Those who attempt to help people suffering from chronic depression face a double problem. They can begin to feel exasperated with the depressed person's apparent self pity; they can also be caught along with them into their dark mood. Both reactions in the visitor are unhealthy and should be guarded against. If we become involved with a depressed person over a period of time, it is advisable to have someone to confide in, so helping to prevent us getting caught in that web of depression ourselves.

There is a danger that some well intentioned Christian worker may see depression as a sin for the believer. I am sure that this is a very wrong understanding of depression. Indeed, as well as being quite mistaken, it can be positively harmful in that it can lead to even greater upset because of the guilt that is thereby engendered.

I do not deny that a person sharing the reasons for their depression can find huge relief through being helped to bring a past wrong to God for his forgiveness through Christ. Hurts from the past can be faced and dealt with

prayerfully and lovingly by a skilled helper. The Psalms are full of times when people have been at the end of their tether and yet found God has remained faithful. 'I took the burdens off your backs.... When you were in trouble, you called to me, and I saved you. From my hiding place in the storm, I answered you...' (Ps. 81:6, 7).

Prayer

Finally, I can't emphasise enough the importance of regular prayer for those whom we visit. I would suggest prayer is needed on three levels.

First, we should pray for our people one by one, with their varying needs. This is where a small notebook or card index system comes into its own. An easily accessible note of items for prayer will be a great help.

Secondly, we should pray for ourselves, that we will be usable in God's hands. I have found that as I drive or walk from home to home I am best to be in a prayerful attitude, praying with each step that Christ will be with me, his Spirit go before me to prepare the way, and my own heart be ready for whatever I shall meet.

Thirdly, we should look for the opportunity to pray in those homes we enter. I could never say that prayer in each home is to be a rule. Rather that we should be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and to the situation we find. We should also be ready to read from Scripture and lead in prayer if at all possible. It can mean a great deal to people if we feel able to promise to pray for their personal needs regularly. As already mentioned, permission should be obtained before sharing those needs with a congregational prayer fellowship. But permission hardly is needed for us to promise to bring a tortured soul before the Throne of Grace each week.

May God enable all those of us who visit in Christ's name to be instruments of peace and joy, and to lead others to the love of God which is found in our blessed Lord.

Liz Frost is a Social Worker and Counsellor in Belvoir Park Hospital, Belfast

Some people have 'learning difficulties' while others are 'physically' or 'visually' challenged. People are not 'wheelchair bound' in the nineties; certainly not! They are 'wheelchair users'. Whilst twenty years ago, the word 'crippled' was a straight-forward adjective used to describe a physical handicap, it is now a taboo, derogatory slander. Aside from the fact that the afore-mentioned 'challenged' are now all shielded from any possible offence by ludicrous political-correctness, things have changed enormously for disabled people over the last thirty-years, and I am the first to admit that the majority of these changes have been positive: vast progress has been made in medical fields such as prosthesis technology and neural surgery; most new buildings now incorporate lifts and ramps into their designs. However, although on the surface things are changing and everybody is pretending that the world has just about achieved a prejudice-free status, let's take a slightly closer look.

Hidden prejudice

The most recent illustration of the prejudice we can experience was at the Commonwealth Games a couple of years ago in Toronto: an Australian official was reported, by every form of media, to have said that the disabled competitors did not belong at the Games, and that they were 'an embarrassment to themselves and the able-bodied athletes'. Of course in response, there was an uproar around the globe, for to say such a thing openly in society is definitely not politically correct.

What I would like to know is, how many people secretly agreed with the official, but were too ashamed to admit it? Inevitably, the Australian official made a full, public apology afterwards and completely retracted the statement, putting it down to a 'slip of the tongue'. However, I feel that this explanation incriminates him even more, does it not, since surely a 'slip of the tongue' is speaking your mind when it would have been better, in retrospect, to keep your thoughts to

yourself. So has society truly advanced in its acceptance of the disabled, or has it just realised that it is much 'nicer' and 'easier' to pretend they have?

There is no problem with integration when you are a young child; in fact I can honestly say that I did not even realise that I was different until I was nine or ten. Even then, when people know you as a person and not

Alien

just as a pair of elbow-crutches, no problem arises concerning special treatment. It is only when you begin to venture out into the world independently that it slowly occurs to you that everybody is being far too nice to you for comfort! You soon learn that there is a very fine line between being assisted and being patronised.

The results of a recent survey on disabled persons found that the most easily integrateable type of disabled person is a young female with a walking impediment (which is rather fortunate as far as I am concerned). However, I have many friends who are amputees and 'wheelchair users', and

amongst the Able Bodies

by Susie Easton

when we are together it provides much sick amusement to exchange stories about the way the world has been treating us—literally.

A story that has always stayed in my mind is of a girl called Maureen who is in a wheelchair. She was 'parked' outside a shop, waiting for her friend when an old lady came up and pushed a couple of coins into her hand 'To buy some sweeties with'. Not so unusual, you might say, except for the fact that Maureen was a twenty-something year old medical student at the time!

Our level best

To be fair, prejudiced or not, society does do its level best to try and make life easier for its disabled members. I do not think that I have had to open a door for myself for at least a couple of years! And this help is more often than not given in a spirit of genuine concern, rather than the patronising condescension mentioned previously.

But we need more than somebody to carry our shopping and hold doors. Access is a huge problem when you are in a wheelchair, even more so than you might imagine. Having at first-hand experienced this for short periods after operations, it is not at all pleasant being completely surrounded by anonymous legs and chipping the paintwork of every door you use. Think of any building you know at split-level, and narrow, swing-doors: a veritable obstacle course if you use a wheelchair. And I'm not even going to mention public transport...!

The government always make such an issue of it when they go to assist minority groups, including the disabled, but their help should be *de rigueur*, instead of a favour. Admittedly they have legislated that new buildings must be 'wheelchair friendly' and have disabled parking, etc. What use is this, though, when they scrap the Disabled Persons' Bill, which, if it had been allowed through Parliament, would have universally improved human-rights for the disabled and provided much more effective protection against discrimination in the workplace than presently exists? But this extremely important Bill was not approved in the House of Commons and no satisfactory explanation was ever given as to why not.

So are attitudes changing along with architecture? Who can tell? People tend to keep their deepest, darkest thoughts to themselves, don't they? They say all the barriers within mankind are being slowly but surely broken down. Are they? Ask me again in twenty more years; we'll see.

A daughter of the manse, 16 year old Susie is currently studying for Higher exams.

Ann Allen meets

What is a session clerk supposed to be and do? Good questions? If you were to look for a profile or remit for a model session clerk in the pages of Cox or any other practical or liturgical tome you would look in vain. People called to that position have only prior experience of someone else's style and their own instinctive gifts to guide them. It was therefore particularly interesting to meet for the first time the session clerk of Davidsons Mains Church in Edinburgh. Alistair Stewart is the deputy rector of Currie High School and for the past 6 years has served his congregation as session clerk.

Alistair, did you have a clear idea of what sort of session clerk you would be?

Not at all! My earliest recollection of a session clerk was my uncle who was not only clerk but also the choir, the beadle, the presbytery elder, a one man band in fact—and I was clear that I was not going to be like him.

What sort of church pedigree do you have?

I have a very traditional Church of Scotland background. My father was an elder in a Glasgow congregation. I grew up in the church, was active in the BB and grew gradually into faith and membership. There was no 'Damasus road' type of experience for me. There were times of spiritual regression in my life as a young man, and other wise a pretty boring and



predictable progression.

When did your association with Davidsons Mains Church begin?

I came through to live in Edinburgh, married and saw reflected in this congregation a village community, a lively social programme to attract, an intimate building with great singing and a warm welcome. That was what initially attracted us as a young couple. That was 30 years ago and we've been here ever since.

How important is it do you think that a session clerk has a long association with his congregation?

I think it is critical that the clerk has the full confidence of the session, the congregation and the minister and to gain that kind of standing I think anyone would have to be in membership a fair length of time.

How were you elected clerk?

Good question! I'm not sure I know! A group of 3 members of the session and the minister approached me and asked if I would consider taking on the job. Initially I said no, and then after further consideration, I agreed.

Had you already been an elder for some time?

That was 6 years ago and I had served as a district elder for 14 years by then.

What do you think specifically prepared you for the role?

Some time before we had formed an Education committee on the session and I had become convener of that. Then our minister retired and I served on the vacancy committee so I suppose these two jobs gave me a heightened profile in the session and moved me into the centre of things.

How large is your session here?

We have 75 elders on the session and a congregation of around 900 so each elder has around 15 folk in his district.

I think this could be fairly described as a largely professional middle class congregation so I imagine you have a session full of intelligent articulate people. How easy is it to enable them to contribute and yet lead them?

We have changed over the last 7 years from a session which met monthly and was very much in the style of the moderator up there and the punters down here. We now meet only 4 times

Alistair Stewart

a year in full session. We have a session executive committee and a committee structure.

Do these committees involve all the elders?

There are 6 committees in all. They cover worship, education, prayer, action, fellowship, and social activities. Elders are encouraged to serve on a committee for 3 years, have a fallow year and then join a different committee.

Have the elders appreciated this different format?

We are actually going to review how it has worked and get feed back, but yes on the whole I think it has been beneficial. It enables elders to get an in depth understanding of different aspects of the life of the congregation and ultimately a better overall view of the development in the church.

Has this been more economical with people's time?

Certainly we hope it has helped to ease the minister's work load. The time spent on session business has probably been spent more profitably and the burden shared around more evenly.

Do you think this change in structure has altered the congregation's perception of the session?

I think it has certainly created bonds with the congregation because 2 or 3 ordinary members of the congregation sit on each committee alongside the



elders. This has encouraged people to identify with session decisions and it also works the other way with the session being aware of what is going on at grass roots.

Change is usually quite threatening to folk and yet your session seem to have been willing to experiment.

Well we have the movers and shakers who push us along but we do have others who are reluctant to alter things and have to be reassured and encouraged. Pace is all important. We have tried to be very patient, smooth the way and still be open to modification.

Would you say that the session is viewed as a power group in the congregation?

I don't think that is the term I would use. I think there may be a danger that the session along with the people who serve on the committees may be seen

as an inner circle and we have to work hard at not being seen as exclusive within the church. We have good tentacles out into the congregation through elders attached to organisations and best of all the district elders' visits.

In a congregation like this with many talented people how do you go about electing new elders?

The congregation are asked to privately suggest names. Numbers are not specified. The session then looks at all the names in the light of the spiritual criteria that the minister reminds us of. At this stage we discard names for various reasons; health, age, whatever. Then we finalise a list. People should not be aware that they have been nominated so disappointment is avoided. The minister and myself take half the names each and approach the folk to ask them to consider nomination. We would then meet for further instruction here in the house. The minister would explain the spiritual remit of the eldership and I would explain the practical aspects. Only after this are people asked to make a final decision and then would go forward for ordination.

Do you insist that people be in membership for a certain time first?

No. We are looking for people with gifts, all kinds of spiritual gifts and some folk join the session after being with us for just a few years. We hope we are open to new blood as well as

valuing the well established folk.

What role does prayer play in the life of the session?

Well we do strive to put prayer on the congregational agenda and keep it well to the forefront. A major difference our minister has brought has been in encouraging the congregation in public prayer. The intercessory prayer at our evening service is taken by elders and it's good to see a growing confidence in public prayer. It's important for the session to foster that in a whole variety of forms.

What has been the most difficult aspect of the role for you personally?

Without doubt that has to be the hassle situations with people. There are the situations where conflict has to be defused, where antagonisms have to be resolved. There have been times, after a hard day at school, when I have felt I could do without this, but that's the down side of the job.

Do you see that role as peacemaker as a major part of your leadership?

Yes, along with other aspects. I'm a patcher, an enabler, a fixer, an encourager and an administrator. I have to be a foil for the minister and a friend to the minister.

How important a part of your work is your relationship with your minister?

Oh, it's an integral part. I don't think you could contemplate being session clerk to a minister unless you were his friend. The minister had a say in my election. It's important for me to know he wanted me as his session clerk

Say you disagreed with him over an issue. How would you resolve that?

Were that to happen we would sit down in private and discuss it. I would be able then to explain to others why the minister took the line he did. The principle is important. I see my job as explaining the actions the minister has taken to the congregation and protecting the minister as far as possible. Ministers often fight with their hands tied behind their backs because of

confidentiality and other issues and so I want to give him all the support I can.

Has the session discussed how they could support the minister in the handling of issues like baptism of infants and marriage of cohabiting couples?

Not as such. The minister has explained what he does in certain circumstances and the principles he operates. This has helped to depersonalise the issues and the session has accepted the minister's views although not necessarily everyone might agree with them. We have tensions around these circumstances like everywhere else and all we can do is help the folk involved to understand the reasons behind decisions as sensitively and as kindly as we can.

How do you manage to avoid factions developing?

Well at the moment we have a major buildings development programme and that could be a recipe for tensions. Then we have prudent stewards and the keenest spenders, we have differences over scriptural interpretation. I have learned a lot from my minister's sensitivity. We have tried to be clear about what is God's will in various situations. We have tried to change things slowly, to work by prayer, to be aware that when things are changed these are things that were put in place by long standing members. Sadly over the years we have had 1 or 2 resignations but on the whole we have gone forward together.

Suppose now your nephew were to come to you and say 'Uncle Alistair, should I accept the invitation to become session clerk?' What advice would you give him?

I'd say be sure it's what the Lord wants you to do. He's your best ally. Be sure you have the confidence of all the elders and the full support of your minister and then go for it. It's a very fulfilling role to have your finger on the pulse of the congregation.

How would you feel about stepping down and letting someone else do the job?

Both my predecessors were only in this role for 7 years. I would step down and into another place of work in the church if I felt it was time. It would worry me if someone could not step aside. That could mean they were in the job for a bit of self glorification. I suppose that is a danger, but of course it shouldn't be for above all else the session clerk is a servant. That's what I am.

How do you think you've grown in this job Alistair?

You'd be better to ask someone else. I don't think I'm the best person to assess that.

So I asked the best person I could think of—Jeremy Middleton, Alistair's minister.

(Jeremy) I would say Alistair's gifts were ideally suited to his being session clerk and they have grown over the years. He was an excellent pastoral elder and he has used these gifts to graciously sort out issues without being afraid to 'eyeball' folk. He has a remarkable openness to learn, unusual in a teacher! He combines the traditionalism from his background with a great openness of vision all the while keeping his feet firmly on the ground. It was his vision to forward the development in buildings. He anticipates problems. He leads by example in his faithfulness at worship morning and evening. Dare I say he can read my mind and even better articulate issues for me! The qualities of boldness, initiative, graciousness, faith, all that you would look for in a great session clerk, God has developed in him.

Perhaps in the light of all he has learned, Alistair could be the man to draw up that missing remit for a model session clerk.

Book Reviews

The Gift of Giving

R T Kendall

London, Hodder and Stoughton,
1992, 95pp., £2.50
ISBN 0 340 56891 7

This republication of R T Kendall's study of Tithing, the original 1982 title, is very welcome. He tackles the topic systematically with chapters on: 'Why every Christian should tithe'; 'The origin of tithing—The Gospel and the Law'; and 'The blessing of tithing'. 'Do you have any questions?' is perhaps the most useful chapter. Kendall's arguments are well backed up with Scripture. Whereas I believe that tithing is a minimum for Christians in their giving, Dr Kendall perhaps over emphasises its role as a solution to ones own spiritual problems (p.12). Dr Kendall's argument is also spoiled a little by his seeming insistence that salvation is to be had by faith (yes!), irrespective of how we live thereafter (no!) (p.33). The warnings in Hebrews 3, 4 and 6 need to be taken seriously. This book, however, should be priority reading for everyone, especially in the present lackadaisical attitude to Christian commitment.

Brock A White, Kirkaldy

Excellence in Leadership: The pattern of Nehemiah

John White

Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1986,
125pp., £3.50
ISBN 0 85110 482 7

John White's indebtedness to Nehemiah began in his days as a medical student and British Chairman of IVF. The lessons learned from that Old Testament hero's leadership in a tough situation continued to stand him in good stead as he helped found the Latin American Fellowship of Evangelical Students. The present book is written after a lifetime's reflection on and practice of the principles learned from a biblical man of prayer and man of action who also emerges in these pages as a man of flesh and blood with whose fears and obstacles to success we can identify. This little volume is not an exposition of the book of Nehemiah. It is, rather, a series of essays

based on passages that highlight various aspects of Nehemiah's leadership of the Jewish people in Jerusalem at a critical time in their history. The topics are: the Leader and Prayer, the Leader and Organisation, the Leader and the Work, the Leader and Opposition, the Leader and Opposition from Within, the Leader and Personal Attacks, the Leader and Renewal, and the Leader and Endurance. In his conclusion White reminds us that we have seen that Nehemiah's concern for God's priorities and for the people of Jerusalem determined his leadership style. He taught us the value of keeping ultimate goals always in mind. This is a challenging and instructive book for anyone involved in Christian leadership.

Allan Webster, Letham

Confident Pastoral Leadership

Howard R Sugden and Warren Wiersbe

Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 1993,
188pp.,
ISBN 08010 8351 6

This is a second edition of a book first published twenty years ago. The book has been revised and expanded to deal with some of the contemporary problems that the church faces (p.9). It is a book of questions and answers arising from pastor's conferences held in various places by the authors. They write from out of their own experience of pastoral leadership in churches in the USA. Consequently some of the things they say are not so directly relevant to those who minister in situations quite different from theirs. The authors are, however, well justified in thinking that pastors of different denominations can still benefit from what they have to say. They had young pastors in mind as (they) wrote these pages (p.12). Nevertheless, there is something for all of us here.

Charles M Cameron, Dunfermline

The Case Against Christ

J Young

Hodder and Stoughton, £4.99
ISBN 0 340 524 626

Books intended to answer basic theo-

logical questions for the person in the street generally find it difficult to tread the path of serious scholarship without falling off into the abyss of incomprehensible technical terms and complex language. Thankfully, *The Case Against Christ* is a most welcome exception. John Young manages to combine a humorous style of writing with a well-balanced and theologically sound exposition of some of the aspects of Christianity that are commonly found difficult. Young's book works well. He not merely presents theologically secure replies to questions such as the relationship of Christianity and science, but does so showing how to approach answering such questions. The latest edition contains a section of suggestions for group discussions on some of the issues raised in *The Case Against Christ*. The main strength of this book is the manner in which it shows that theological debate is not only healthy but can be stimulating in itself and not necessarily a dry exercise for professors. Whilst making it clear which views it is sensible to question Young does not disparage views contradictory to his own. The author acknowledges that questions such as the emergence of evil are detailed and cannot be answered completely in a book such as this. While his book is designed to introduce new ideas to the theological novice, it is crucial that Young is able to relate to those who do not have a detailed grasp of theology while not devaluing his books as a piece of scholarship. It is undoubtedly this ability that makes *The Case Against Christ* an invaluable tool for any church-goer.

Diarmid Campbell-Jack, Edinburgh

John the Believable Gospel

Ben Barman

Friendly Press, Bristol, 1994, 132pp.,
£5.00 p/b
ISBN 0 948728 32 9

This very readable book comes from the Friendly Press, a small Quaker publishing house. Ben Barman is a member of the Society of Friends, certainly he is a layman. This book is eminently more layman-friendly than

many theological books, with quotations from non-theological works and scientific research. However, the appliance of science and a layman's look at the world of the Bible are hardly enough to qualify a writer in this field. My guess is that a trip to the holy land, combined with reading John A T Robinson were the twin sparks for writing this book. Certainly the latter's line is adopted almost throughout the work. What we have is a useful summary of the kind of Biblical criticism and background taught at some length in a University Divinity Faculty. Sadly, much of this is accepted wholesale. As the title implies John's Gospel is taken as the accurate one, written to correct the Synoptics. No credence is given to the possibility that all four Gospels could be correct. The early chapters, setting the scene on the history of the Jews and the Essene community are quite useful; but when it comes to Biblical interpretation, he is usually far wide of the mark. There is a helpful section about God speaking to us today. However, the problems of the book far outweigh its benefits. Barman is a universalist, seeing God in the life of all humanity. He has a confused view of the Trinity, with no notion of the Divinity of Christ or the atonement. He clearly does not believe in the inspiration of the Scriptures. We have been taken through Barman's own spiritual journey from scepticism to where he is today—excited by much of the Bible. Hopefully, if he encounters some conservative scholars, we will see him in due course a few steps further along that road.

Hugh F Watt, Glasgow

Effective Pastors for a New Century

James E Means

Grand Rapids, Baker, 1993, 239pp.
ISBN 0 8010 6302 7

This book really is a must for all who are concerned with the future of the church's ministry into the next century, both pastors and laity. Indeed, it has the makings of a *Reformed Pastor* for the 21st Century. If James Means is not a spiritual giant in the same league

as Richard Baxter, he certainly has a wide and thorough understanding of almost every aspect of pastoral ministry, and reviews the whole spectrum of issues which are likely to face the church in the years ahead, making suggestions all along the way as to how they may be tackled from a conservative evangelical standpoint. Means stresses that the pastor must first and foremost be a man of God and of the Bible if he is to function properly as the one man in the district who knows God. He must learn to spend far more time in the study (rather than in the office) than is generally the case at present. His aim and that of his church, the talents of all whose members are to be properly marshalled, is to create disciples (and not convene a crowd!). He must lead the church to transform itself—or perish—and to grow, by means of strategy and not serendipity, especially on a person to person basis, in what is becoming an increasingly small and scary world. In short, buy the book (and read, mark and inwardly digest it!) if you are concerned for tomorrow's church—and today's.

Peter Cook, Cheadle Hulme

Giving Birth: Reclaiming Biblical Metaphor for Pastoral Practice

Margaret Hammer

Louisville, Kentucky, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994, 226pp.

Strapped to a table, her arms bound to cross pieces, Lutheran Margaret Hammer felt as if she was naked and vulnerable on the Cross. Many women, she believes, have found kinship with the suffering Christ through birth. Readers who prefer Hammer to focus on our second birth will find half the book usefully justifying empathetic pastoral and liturgical practices. Augustinians who think suffering [in childbirth] proves that sin is transmitted from parents to children should read the other half detailing Scriptural metaphors as an appropriate penance. Where horizons are already expanded by feminist theology, Hammer's realistic amplification of the Scriptural birthing

metaphors will encourage the responsive dynamic ministry urged which reconnects congregations with God's intention in creation and in Christ. Borrow the library copy to expand your vision to bring new life into real life. Thanksgiving may begin again for the childbearing work of women. If applying the metaphors of Mother instead of Father to God causes problems then the whole book is worth reading. Now the Scriptural metaphorical world needs to be used to dignify the masculine initiator of the process, and a couple need to write the volume *Having Sex* to reclaim those metaphors for pastoral ministry.

Peter Bowes, Edinburgh

Bible Power for Successful Living

Norman Vincent Peale

London, Hodder and Staughton, 1993, 189pp., £4.99

ISBN 0 340 62152 4

We live in a world which worships success and, therefore, as so often where the world goes, the church soon follows. Hence the plethora of books on health, wealth and success. Norman Vincent Peale has become famous for his books on positive thinking, which have made a considerable use of biblical language and concepts. Now he has produced a book which purports to expound the Bible's teaching on how to live a healthy and successful life. In the course of the book a certain amount of useful advice is provided, sometimes based on Scripture, sometimes on common sense. There is, however, little attempt to exegete Scripture seriously, although numerous passages are quoted. An argument is more likely to be clinched by a personal anecdote than by convincing exposition. The teaching provided is markedly one sided: sin is mentioned occasionally, but the overwhelming emphasis is on happiness, health and success. Little is said to counteract our in-built tendency to self-centredness. Self-denial and cross-bearing are absent, scarcely any reference is made to the holiness of God (so prominent in Scripture), and the need for and nature

of the atonement are never properly examined. What is useful in Peale's book is said much better elsewhere, and there is much in it that could promote serious misunderstanding of the Christian life.

W D J McKay, Aghadowey, Coleraine

A Call to Live: Vocation for Everyone

Steve Walton

London, Triangle SPCK, 1994, 115pp.
£4.99

ISBN 0 281 04771 5

'Knowing something of my own calling provides great personal direction...It means that I can turn the main focus of my attention and energy in that direction and not feel at the mercy of every need that crosses my path.' In these two sentences the author, an Anglican, shows something of the importance for the Christian of understanding the biblical view of one's calling. In eight well thought out, biblical, cohesive and easy to read chapters he introduces and defines vocation. The four ways Paul uses the call derivatives in his letter to the Romans are examined: called to belong, called to be, called to let God be God, called to do. These are rounded off by two down-to-earth chapters of application. Each of the eight chapters ends with a helpful exercise. Teenagers, teachers of the Word, tool dressers, housewives, unemployed, retired, professionals of all kinds should read this book. But beware, it stings in places. The author says little that is new for the mature Christian, but says it well enough to make a solid impact. He has brought together a valuable resource for personal/group study or sermon preparation on the call, and sharpened it up with helpful illustrations.

Bart Buell, Inverness

Engaging with God

David Peterson

Leicester, Apollos, 1992, 317pp.
£16.99

ISBN 0 85111 428 8

Worship has been described as an uncomfortable pressure point in the

life of the church. Few congregations have not experienced the tensions which the current debate on worship has created. The quest for freedom within form and spontaneity within structure has often presented both innovators and traditionalists with a stern test of Christian goodwill and tolerance. Against this background, David Peterson's book is timely. Defining worship as an engagement with God on terms which he proposes and in the way he alone makes possible and which embraces the whole of our lives, this book is a painstaking study of the biblical principles which should undergird such worship. The approach is that of biblical theology. Beginning with the Old Testament, he explores against the background of God's revelatory and redemptive acts, the means by which and the conditions under which Israel engaged with God. Moving on to the New Testament, the ways in which the various writers use the language of worship are examined in context, establishing the theology of worship of each. Every chapter ends with a conclusion in which the practical implications of the teaching are drawn out. The book ends with an Epilogue describing an imaginary church service which illustrates the biblical principles set out in the book. Few, whatever their churchmanship or theology, will escape the challenge of Peterson's carefully argued conclusions. Both innovators and traditionalists are reminded that formality and informality are not theological categories and that in practice the question will often be decided by the personalities of those in charge and by the particular tradition of the group in question. His insistence on Christ as the ultimate means of relating to God and as the only object of worship will offend religious pluralists. Those who share his conviction that the preaching of the Word of God is a central aspect of worship, should also heed his plea that, if we are to be faithful to Scripture, opportunity ought to be given in our services for the ministry of mutual encouragement. All in all, a welcome, thought provoking expo-

sition of the biblical teaching on worship.

David Easton, Glasgow

How To Give Away Your Faith

Paul Little

Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press

ISBN 0 85110 841 5

Before his death in 1975 Paul Little was extensively involved in the teaching and practice of Personal Evangelism. In an age of awakened interest via programmes such as Person to Person and the Alpha course it is particularly apposite that IVP have reissued this updated version of *How to Share Your Faith*. Originally published in 1973 the book has been updated and expanded by Paul's widow using material from his topical seminars. The result is a fruitful compendium of 'how to do' rather than the sometimes tiring exhortations and oughts. There are numerous pass-ages of analysis, thumb nail sketches, situation examples of a principle and the obvious insights of experiences distilled over the years. This produces a concise, practical alongside feel which avoids the slick formula approach in favour of an ongoing process in which the participants are invited to be involved. It is perhaps not so inter-active as some of the later programmes and the group work possibilities at the end of the chapters would probably have to be augmented in a relevant manner applicable to the local situation. However, this is an excellent book for groups, CUs and individuals who are keen to explore some of the practicalities involved in faith sharing.

Stanley A Brook, Edinburgh

Expository Preaching: Principles and Practice—A Unique How-To Book

Haddon W Robinson

Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1986,
230pp., £9.99

ISBN 0 85110 758 3

As a North American I grew up with numerous how-to books, some of which were short on substance, but long on structure. It was with a measure of trepidation that I began this

how-to book on what is the most central and vital feature of pastoral ministry, preaching. Thankfully my fears were soon allayed as I discovered a sensible and straightforward presentation concerning the basics of preaching. The material is set out in a practical and stimulating manner, helpfully employing anecdote and story to illustrate and illumine principle and procedure. Throughout the ten chapters there is a subliminal plea for appreciating more earnestly the dynamic of preaching the unsearchable richness of Christ in a way which is both edifying to the listener and authentic for the preacher. Robinson's approach grapples intensely with the nuts and bolts of sermon preparation, indicating the need for the preachers to know what they are on about in terms of conviction, coherence, construction and clarity. The chapters are well-defined with helpful sub-divisions. An attractive review of new concepts and definitions is provided at the end of each chapter, with the occasional page of exercises to work through. The Appendices are instructive as the Bibliography is informative. The

Sermon Evaluation Form will undoubtedly give every reader/preacher something to think about! Reading this book has certainly challenged me to be more thorough and thoughtful in my own preparation. And for a modest investment the dividends which might accrue for anyone wanting to be a better preacher could be substantial.

Robert C Nelson, Inverness

Masterplan: How God Makes Sense of our World

Roy Clements

Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1994, 138pp., £3.50

ISBN 0 85110876 8

We are all (says the blurb) looking for an explanation of the way things are. Given the phenomenal sales of books such as *A Brief History of Time* this would appear to be true. But are we looking in the right place, with the right eyes? It is the contention of this book, which originated in addresses to a largely Christian student audience in 1990, that clearly we are not. Clements shows that it is to the Bible we must go if we are ever to discover the answers to such questions as: where are we

coming from, what are we doing here and where are we going to? Surveying the teaching of Genesis 1-11 and Romans 8 in straightforward language understandable to the average thinking layman in our churches, the author, a popular speaker, minister of a busy Cambridge church, and current president of the UCCF, presents God's unfailing plan for creation. God's rescue of fallen humanity through Christ's redemption, and the new creation, beginning in the here and now through the gifts of the Spirit and to be completed in the resurrection of the body in a new heaven and a new earth is clearly presented. There is a wealth of telling illustrations and quotations, though, to this review, several are somewhat dated. Your reviewer has two reservations. First should the title not be: How God gives sense to our world? Second, surely the answer to the question, How did the human race begin? is vital to settling the questions, What are we like? and What is our destiny? These matters apart, this book can be heartily recommended.

Don Elcoat, Hull